

TESTING OUR PATIENCE:

HOW WISCONSIN LOWERED STANDARDS,
WIDENED THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP,
AND BUSTED ITS STATE EXAMS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

HOW TO FIX TEST SCORES



A REPORT BY



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Key Findings

Within her first year as Wisconsin's educational leader, State Superintendent Jill Underly published a series of essays on equity. She wrote rousing about Wisconsin's infamous education achievement gaps for disadvantaged groups and what it would take to fix them. "We need to question what we are doing as an education system that results in these disparities... The question is again whether we have the collective will to reckon with these disparities and the need for belonging in our classrooms. I believe we do, and we must."¹

She also included this. "This is the reality of the achievement gap in Wisconsin. It cannot continue this way; we are failing our students of color, and one factor in that failure is in the language we use to describe it."²

Two years later, the language describing the achievement gap became the center of a boiling debate. On June 6, 2024, the Department of Public Instruction publicly announced two substantial changes to the Forward Exam, PreACT Secure, and ACT that students take at the end of the school year.³ The names of the four categories into which students sort would switch to softer, "growth-based" terms. Students would no longer demonstrate Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, or Advanced skills, but be Developing toward, Approaching, Meeting, or Advanced past Wisconsin state standards.⁴

More consequentially, DPI altered each test's "cut scores," the minimum scores a student needs to reach each of those tiers of achievement.⁵ Citing revisions to state standards, DPI announced that Wisconsin families would no longer be able to compare their children's results to their standing before the pandemic.⁶ Additionally, it soon became clear that DPI had lowered the standards for each performance level.⁷ These changes have major consequences for Wisconsin's schools, local leaders, state officials, and families.

¹ State Superintendent Doctor Jill Underly, "[Racial Disparities and Our Collective Will](#)," April 19, 2022.

² State Superintendent Doctor Jill Underly, "[Racial Disparities and Our Collective Will](#)," April 19, 2022.

³ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[DPI Focuses on Growth-Based Mindset in Updated Student Performance Level Descriptors for Standardized Assessments](#)," June 6, 2024.

⁴ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[Updated Asset-Based Performance Levels](#)," June 6, 2024.

⁵ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[DPI Focuses on Growth-Based Mindset in Updated Student Performance Level Descriptors for Standardized Assessments](#)."

⁶ Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "[What You Need To Know: Standard Setting and Forward Exam Updates](#)," August 14, 2024.

⁷ Alan J. Borsuk, "[Does Lowering Cut Scores and Changing Terminology on Standardized Tests Better Serve Wisconsin Students?](#)" *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, August 23, 2024.

Given that test scores release this month, it has become important to know when the state test changes were decided, what about them has changed, how much the tests have changed, and how changes could affect schools' pursuit of excellence.

Based on public records:

- » **State Superintendent Underly initiated the changes to test score standards and wanted them lowered to match other states'.**
- » **State Superintendent Underly struggled to interpret the implications of new test score standards.**
- » **DPI staff provided information to decisionmakers based on either 50% or 55% proficiency in 2024, up from approximately 40% in 2023.**
- » **DPI staff projected those proficiency levels would widen Wisconsin's achievement gaps along racial, poverty, and disability lines.**
 - » **DPI staff projected those proficiency levels would increase gaps between 4 to 10 points for Black students, 3 to 4 points for economically disadvantaged students, and 5 to 10 points for special-needs students.**
- » **DPI staff projected those proficiency levels would increase ratings on federally mandated state report cards, student performance being equal.**
 - » **DPI staff projected those proficiency levels eventually would cause 71% of districts to score 4 or 5 stars on state report cards, up from 36%, and 63% of schools to score 4 or 5 stars, up from 46%.**
- » **DPI staff projected those proficiency levels would benefit low-poverty schools more than high-poverty schools on state report cards due to how they are calculated.**
- » **DPI staff, to balance out the benefits to low-poverty schools, suggested realigning aspects of the report cards that favor high-poverty schools, benefiting them.**
 - » **DPI staff projected both beneficial changes together eventually would cause 93% of districts to score 4 or 5 stars on state report cards as well as 80% of schools.**
- » **DPI staff, to prevent this drastic shift, suggested changing report card cut scores for the 2024 to 2025 school year.**

Whether State Superintendent Underly accepted the standards suggested by DPI staff and standard setting participants this summer is currently unknown, as are 2024 state test scores. These public records end in April and test scores are private until later in October.

However, if test scores rise between 10% and 15%, if achievement score gaps increase statewide for the disadvantaged, if state report card ratings sharply rise, especially for low-poverty schools, and if Wisconsin politicians spend 2025 fixing report card ratings instead of reading instruction, the teacher supply, special-needs funding, or barriers to expanding high-quality schools, as early district results suggest, the record shows that DPI knew all of it would happen and did it, anyway.

Do we have the collective will to reckon with the massive disparities among Wisconsin students? Or will other states continue to pass us by, taking new residents, new businesses, and new possibilities with them?

Key Quotations

“Dr. Underly is interested in taking another look at how we establish our cut scores for the Forward Exam. Given that we’re amid some other change in that area, we’re asking for a decision paper on what it would take to change the cut scores, as well as what timeline we’d be working off.”

- then-Executive Director Thomas McCarthy, January 23, 2023, initiating changes to test score standards

“Using comparison data from 2019 as the basis for adopting these cut scores reflects that expectations of performance have not changed over time.”

- Office of Educational Accountability, May 30, 2023, setting PreACT score standards for 2023 that DPI would later lower in 2024

“I need help with this. I obviously trust Viji, but I truly don’t understand what I am looking at for my approval. And with all this other nonsense going on with literacy I want to make sure we’re not throwing more fuel onto this fire. The crummy thing is, I am an educator and I don’t understand it - so how are parents supposed to understand this too? If we could set the standards and the cut scores, but then have some kind of way to interpret it to parents and educators as a companion, that would be great. For example, what does Proficient mean vs. Advanced? That they are at grade level vs. the next grade level? I just hate this stuff so much.”

- Superintendent Jill Underly, June 13, 2023, reviewing potential PreACT score standards, reviewing statements saying lowering cut scores would increase report card star ratings more for low-poverty districts than high-poverty districts, questioning the meaning of student performance levels, and commenting on a matter related to literacy during the same period as Act 20 negotiations

“I’m going to need a primer on this, or a tutoring session. I still don’t understand it, and it’s just a learning block that I have on my end.”

- Superintendent Jill Underly, July 6, 2023, reviewing potential PreACT score standards again 1 day before approving them

“After equating, DRC Research staff will provide the impact data to DPI for approval. The impact data shows the percentage of students in each performance level for each grade and content.”

- Data Recognition Corporation, October 26, 2023, referring to performance data DPI would receive by June 10, 2024, before educators reset test score standards

“I also said that NAEP only tests 10,000 nationally, and that’s really an awful way to make generalizations about how kids are doing, and that when we use state assessments to compare kids state by state, it’s not an apples to apples comparison - so if the feds want to get in the assessment game, they should really make it so that we all take the same assessment and have the same cut scores. Because otherwise it’s not very useful information. ...But my feelings on high stakes tests are pretty well known.”

- Superintendent Jill Underly, December 19, 2023, criticizing the Department of Education’s methodology for the NAEP, the national test commonly analyzed by researchers

“Before I jumped off- yes, I’d like to have a conversation about our cut scores being the highest in the country and how we communicate what that translates to with NAEP.”

- Superintendent Jill Underly, February 20, 2024, following up on lowering test score standards

“I also want to, and maybe this exists as a possibility, to norm our levels to be similar to other states... as I hear that we have some of the highest cut scores nationally. I would like them to be looked at so that we aren’t judged negatively when we have direct standards.” - Superintendent Jill Underly, March 7, 2024, taking a tangent on lowering test score standards while discussing changing student performance level names

“Assuming these standard setting activities raise proficiency rates statewide, it is reasonably likely that: (1) proficiency-based achievement gaps will increase, (2) report card Overall Scores will increase year-over-year, and (3) increases in Overall Score and Overall Rating category will impact schools disproportionately (report card rating increases will benefit low-poverty schools more than high-poverty schools).” - Office of Educational Accountability, April 3, 2024, explaining to Superintendent Underly and her cabinet that lowering test score standards would lead to inequitable outcomes

“Our analysis projects that student groups who have been traditionally underserved will see smaller gains in proficiency rates as compared to more advantaged groups, widening the gaps between them.”

- Office of Educational Accountability, April 3, 2024, explaining to Superintendent Underly and her cabinet that lowering test score standards would widen the visibility of achievement gaps

“If proficiency rate gains are substantial, we project report card ratings will increase to such a degree that there will be little difference between schools in terms of their ratings.” - Office of Educational Accountability, April 3, 2024, explaining to Superintendent Underly and her cabinet that lowering test score standards would make school accountability report cards increasingly uniformly high and therefore useless

“In addition, these report card rating increases will benefit low-poverty schools more than high-poverty schools due to variable weighting of Achievement and Growth priority areas, as required by state law. ...As a result, rising proficiency and PBP rates will raise report card scores and ratings to a greater degree for schools and districts with lower percentages of ECD students.” - Office of Educational Accountability, April 3, 2024, explaining to Superintendent Underly and her cabinet that lowering test score standards would disproportionately benefit low-poverty schools, significantly increasing the number whose star ratings would rise

“While the impacts of the assessment standard setting on achievement gaps cannot be addressed, OEA would be able to address some of the challenges to the report card system to a certain extent... Potential next steps: 1. Keep report card calculations and rating thresholds unchanged for the 2023-24 school year as we anticipate relatively moderate increases this year. 2. For the 2024-25 school year, make the following changes to report card calculations: a. Include only two years of assessment data in achievement calculations, including the Achievement priority area, as well as the achievement components of the TGO and On-Track to Graduation priority areas... b. Adjust Growth and TGO rescaling formulas to align these priority area score distributions with the new Achievement priority area score distribution. 3. Prior to release of 2024-25 report cards, conduct a report card standard setting to establish new report card rating thresholds.” - Office of Educational Accountability, April 3, 2024, proposing to Superintendent Underly and her cabinet that DPI significantly change state accountability report cards in 2025 to attempt to balance out the effect of lowering test score standards in 2024

“Does Cabinet have a lower or upper threshold for recommendations? Forward? ACT?”

- Office of Educational Accountability, April 9, 2024, ending a meeting on test score standards before teachers had a chance to set those standards in July

Key Questions

These records raise numerous questions about the process, results and effects of DPI's choices. Asking these questions would create accountability.

What in January 2023 prompted Superintendent Underly to want to change test score standards?

Could 2024 cut scores have been calibrated to the same distributions as 2023 cut scores?

Did DPI leadership reconsider lowering cut scores when told in May 2023 that doing so would benefit low-poverty districts more than high-poverty districts?

If DPI set PreACT scores in 2023 that reflected expectations of performance had not changed over time, then lowered them in 2024, have DPI's expectations of students lowered over time?

Was "this other nonsense going on with literacy" referring to the Act 20 legislation being worked on then? If so, was there an aspect of Act 20 that Superintendent Underly considered nonsense, or was it all nonsense?

Did Superintendent Underly tell legislators during the Act 20 negotiations that DPI would change test cut scores?

In simple terms that parents can understand, how would Superintendent Underly define "Proficient" under 2023 standards? How would she define "Meeting" under 2024 standards?

Why did Superintendent Underly want to change cut scores before she understood how they had been calibrated?

Who guided Superintendent Underly through understanding PreACT test score setting?

Which state's test score standard does Superintendent Underly prefer we match?

Did the DPI cabinet recommend cut score floors or ceilings for the Forward or ACT before teachers participated in the score-setting process months later?

Does Superintendent Underly believe the Department of Education's NAEP test, used to track state and national progress for decades, is an illegitimate measure of student learning?

Did DPI provide educators setting Forward Exam cut scores contextual information like past test scores?

Did DPI provide educators setting ACT cut scores contextual information like past test scores?

Did Superintendent Underly accept the cut scores as each group of participants recommended, or did she adjust them?

Does Superintendent Underly feel like a 19 on the ACT is an appropriate minimum for proficiency for 11th graders, given ACT predicts 37% of students at that level would get a D or F in college algebra and 18% at that level would get a D or F in college English composition?

Does DPI possess “impact data” for the Forward Exam sent in May and June 2024, as the contract states? Does that data show 2024 proficiency rates before June standard setting took place?

Given Superintendent Underly’s bewilderment when trying to understand the effects of PreACT score setting, how did she know if Forward and ACT score setting was the right match for Wisconsin students?

Are the current cut scores “reasonable and defensible in terms of the process, public and educator perception, and related other data,” as Director Visalakshi Somasundaram stated?

Did Superintendent Underly’s approved changes increase proficiency achievement gaps on the Forward Exam, PreACT, or ACT? Were such changes equitable?

Did academic- or equity-focused members of Superintendent Underly’s cabinet agree that cut score changes were equitable?

Did DPI enact any cut score changes or adjustments to 2024 report cards?

What is the distribution of star ratings to districts on 2024 report cards?

Did low-poverty schools disproportionately benefit on 2024 report cards?

Will DPI enact any cut score changes or adjustments to 2025 report cards?

Is it equitable to ask parents to get their hands dirty to understand whether their child is doing well in school or if their child’s school is successful?

Was DPI telling the truth in August when they said the effects of cut score changes on state report cards were unknown?

Does Governor Evers feel like these test score and report card changes unfairly diminish high-poverty schools and unfairly commend low-poverty schools?



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