



INSTITUTE FOR  
REFORMING GOVERNMENT

# WAUSAU WINS

HOW WAUSAU BECAME A WISCONSIN EDUCATION LEADER

JANUARY 2026

# ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR REFORMING GOVERNMENT

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The Institute for Reforming Government, along with its partner organization IRG Action Fund, is focused on developing free-market and limited-government reforms, taking action on them, and getting results for Wisconsin. Founded in 2018, IRG has quickly grown into one of the state's largest think tanks, boasting an elite policy team with decades of experience in state and federal government, trade associations, and statewide campaigns. Most importantly, IRG gets results for the conservative movement in Wisconsin.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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His work has focused on improving reading skills, the teacher pipeline, and the expansion of high-performing schools.

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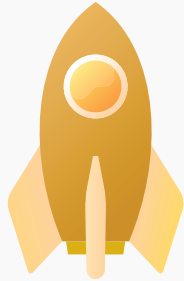
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# 2025 IRG AWARDEES



**NEWMAN CATHOLIC  
SCHOOLS**

***READING ROCKET AWARD***



**THOMAS JEFFERSON  
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

***HIDDEN GEM AWARD***



**SCHOOL DISTRICT  
OF WAUSAU**

***LITERACY LEADERSHIP AWARD***

***These schools are doing reading right.***

## INTRODUCTION

Something special is happening in Wausau schools. While other large Wisconsin school districts sink to the bottom of statewide performance, Wausau has ably recovered from the pandemic and is rising. In fact, some of Wausau's public and private schools rank among Wisconsin's best.

But has Wausau's reputation matched its performance? No. As ever, too little attention is paid to the excellence going on in central Wisconsin. That needs to change. Achievement must be rewarded.

This survey first examines the data. Objectively, how does Wausau outperform its peers? It then focuses on what could be a key driver of continued improvement: its commitment to literacy growth. It ends with something all too rare: the Wausau School District's commitment to fiscal responsibility.

## THE NUMBERS SAY "QUALITY"

Far too many districts across Wisconsin have been devastated by post-pandemic choices. In Wausau, all indicators are green.

School skipping and misbehavior have stormed through districts since 2020. The resulting maelstrom has pushed teachers out of the profession, disrupted the progress of other children, and created an underclass of students left behind forever.

In Wausau, however, suspension counts have returned to pre-pandemic levels. This is miraculous given the current state of Wisconsin schools, where suspensions have jumped 1.8% since 2019, 5 times Wausau's rate. If all of Wisconsin had recovered as well as Wausau had, the state would have had 46,426 fewer suspensions. That would have meant more students in class making up for lost time. Instead, behavior spun out of control and children fell behind.

Similarly, Wausau is a welcome exception regarding attendance. Wausau's attendance is down -1.1% from 2020 to 2024, the most recent available data. That is better than Wisconsin as a whole, -1.7%, as well as many similar districts. In fact, despite having many more impoverished, at-risk children than districts like Appleton, Waukesha, Stevens Point, and Middleton, Wausau's attendance recovered better from school closures than any of them. All of the help in the world does not matter if a child is not at school to receive it, and more and more are in Wausau.

Because Wausau got kids back in class, its graduates' outcomes look as brilliant as ever. 9.0% of Wausau students graduate high school in 4 years, the highest rate in decades. That leads to a 50.5% college enrollment rate, including 2- and 4-years. Wausau sends a higher percentage of students to higher education than those with colleges in their backyards, including Stevens Point, Oshkosh, Waukesha, Green Bay, and La Crosse. But graduate success occurs on factory floors and in clinics as well. 4.8% of graduates have participated in a youth apprenticeship. That means 1 in 20 students leaves Wausau ready to join a skilled trade. Wausau is putting the pandemic behind it when so many others have not.

## MAKING MONEY COUNT

Managing taxpayer dollars matters. Wausau, like cities everywhere, is facing fewer students to fill school buildings and fewer dollars as a result. What people may not realize is Wausau is battling the greater forces at work much better than its peer cities.

To start, the academic growth happening in Wausau classrooms may be mitigating the shrinking occurring in other districts. Since 2020, the Wausau School District's enrollment has only shrunk 5.0%. This is atypical among large, urban districts; Wausau ranks 7th among the 25 biggest districts, which lost 8.8% on average. In fact, Wausau may end up larger than districts like Sheboygan and Waukesha as their pupil populace collapses and Wausau's barely trickles. "We really want to develop the best product that we can...having great communication with all of our constituents," says Superintendent Cale Bushman. The news is even better for the area's private schools. In an era where Wisconsin's Catholic and Lutheran schools are disappearing outright, Newman Catholic declined a mere 27 students and Trinity stayed flat. Faith Christian, on the other hand, expanded from 173 to 310 students in that period. What is more, Wausau's schools seem to understand that what is good for them is good for the city. Bickering over facilities and enrollment between public and private schools is fragmenting places across Wisconsin. Meanwhile, after Wausau consolidated 4 buildings to use money wisely, they quickly got 2 off of the books by selling them to Saint John Lutheran and Faith Christian, allowing consolidation and expansion. That is a growth-oriented mindset. As Principal Diane Goetsch said, "It is so exciting for us to be able to continue this ministry in a way that's not only going to allow us to grow physically, but also to grow spiritually." Communities that hold their schools, businesses, and amenities steady in times of hardship will end up Wisconsin's winners. So far, Wausau is doing its part.

Moreover, this may shock you: Wisconsin public schools employed more people in 2025 than they ever have in the state's history, according to the Department of Public Instruction and National Center for Education Statistics. This is despite having the fewest students to educate since 1992. From Act 10 to the pandemic, Wisconsin lost -16,886 students but hired 10,808 additional staff, only 2,176 of them teachers. From 2020 to 2025, schools added 2,141 staff, but enrollment decreased by 47,092. With federal pandemic aid spent and a baby bust hitting kindergarten, many districts are facing referenda, slashed budgets, or mergers. Wausau is different, as is its past referendum. Since DPI began tracking data in 2016-2017, Wausau ranks 5th among the 25 biggest districts in fiscally responsible staffing, and Wausau ranks in the top quartile Wisconsin-wide. In contrast, areas like Eau Claire, Wauwatosa, Sun Prairie, and Sheboygan have added dozens of staff when it is wiser to tighten belts. On top of that, Wausau has found ways to diminish overhead in the process. Adjusted for inflation, Wausau School District spends \$179 less per student on administration and operations than it did from the post-Act 10 baseline. That has freed up about \$1.5 million for student learning. In other words, while other districts are hoping taxpayers keep them afloat after unsustainable hiring booms, Wausau is balancing providing what students need with smart budgeting.

*Among the 25 biggest Wisconsin districts, Wausau ranks*

READING  
OVERPERFORMANCE



MATH  
OVERPERFORMANCE



GRADUATION



COLLEGE



YOUTH  
APPRENTICESHIP



ATTENDANCE



DISCIPLINE



ENROLLMENT  
RETENTION



FISCAL  
RESPONSIBILITY



## SUPERSTAR STUDENTS

Would it surprise you to learn that some of the state's best public schools reside in Wausau, Wisconsin? If parents knew their children could raise the trajectory of their futures by moving to Marathon County, many more would.

But The Department of Public Instruction's inaccurate, biased report cards favor wealthy and poor districts at once, penalizing the middle class. Fantastic districts like Wausau get the same 3-star rating as Milwaukee, Kenosha, and Madison. That is not the truth.

In fact, Wausau's schools are worth moving to attend, with 4 being worthy of 5 stars as exemplary in 2025. By controlling test scores for poverty, students' backgrounds are put on a level playing field and schools' quality comes out. That is where Wausau shines. Jefferson Elementary gleams brightest as Wausau's superstar. Its eye-popping 60% proficiencies are elite, but such scores when 61% of its students are economically disadvantaged make Jefferson 1 of the 60 best public grade schools in Wisconsin. In fact, Jefferson scores like wealthy suburbs of Wisconsin's biggest cities like Verona, Wauwatosa, and West De Pere, even though Jefferson's students come from more challenging backgrounds. Can you believe DPI would rate it 3 stars? Parents may know of Stettin Elementary, the rare school DPI rewards with 4 and 5 stars. But controlling for poverty puts it in the top 15% of public schools statewide in reading proficiency! And look out for Newman Catholic Schools. If its poverty rate is accurate, Newman scores in the top 1% of 1,900 Wisconsin grade schools!

The success of Wausau's schools is not being stated enough in the media nor in the halls of power in Madison. Until state report cards change, Wausau's excellence may stay under the radar.

## THE METHOD TO THE MAGIC

The most exciting thing about Wausau's schools is that their best days may be ahead of them. Wisconsin schools are embarking on an exciting effort to help children read. Right now, Wisconsin ranks 34th in early reading schools on the national NAEP exam, adjusted for demographics. Leading states like Florida, Massachusetts, and Mississippi have pursued "the science of reading." That means teaching students phonics (sounding out words) and background knowledge so they can easily handle any new word they encounter and rapidly increase their fluency. Act 20, a new Wisconsin law, pushes districts to copy the nation's best.

Buying the right new curriculum textbook is key, as is finishing a teacher retraining program that shows educators how to use those textbooks best. Some districts are picking low-quality curriculum textbooks that maintain their low performance, and others are prioritizing staff convenience over getting training done. Those districts will not see results predicted from such a massive overhaul. But Wausau is executing new reading reforms as well as any state leader and should see immense progress.

The Wausau School District chose perhaps the best reading curriculum in America, Wit & Wisdom, alongside Really Great Reading. Why is this curriculum so good? First, most - most! - reading curricula these days do not have students read full books, just excerpts. As a result, students fail to build stamina over time to tackle novels, papers, or work materials, contributing to their erratic attention span in the smartphone age.

Wit & Wisdom helps students acclimate to real, full books at all grade levels. Second, Wit & Wisdom builds background knowledge. The curriculum's texts in science, history, and classic literature help students learn about the world and comprehend what they are reading far more than the repetitious or random excerpts in other choices. Third, it lets teachers focus on what they do best: teaching. Wisconsin educators have had to spend hours into the night writing lesson plans, scouring Pinterest for ideas, and foregoing family time. It is no wonder Wisconsin burned out so many. Wit & Wisdom does the grunt work for teachers, freeing their focus to classroom management and student success.

And it is not just the public schools prepared to skyrocket. Newman Catholic Schools coupled the Wonders curriculum with what research determined is the single best phonics program in the country, UFLI Foundations. Developed at the University of Florida, states across the nation are knocking down the doors for it. The reason is simple: Florida has been a top-3 reading state for decades. Do you need an example? Miami-Dade County Public Schools has 28% more free lunch students than Wisconsin's public schools and triple the amount who do not speak English natively, 18%. But Miami students outscore Wisconsin's in early reading, 45% college-ready proficiency to 39%. Miami's Hispanic students, many of whom speak Spanish at home, tie Wisconsin's White students. Imagine if Milwaukee or Green Bay had better test scores than Stratford! That is the power of UFLI, and Newman Catholic is tapping into it.

Most importantly, Wausau has followed through incredibly on literacy enhancements. Reading retraining for teachers, to quote Wausau Elementary Education Director Julie Schell, leaves teachers "armed with lots of new information around the science of reading" and how to "take that knowledge and put it into...practice." But districts across Wisconsin have barely started the training or fought with their school boards about doing it. That is not the case in Wausau. Teachers even volunteered to come start the work in summer. As a result, 92% of teachers had completed the 35-hour Cox Campus reading training before the school year began, which may have been among the highest completion rates in the state. All finished on November 14th. This is stellar news for students and taxpayers: Wausau School District will start seeing initial reading improvements this year, far ahead of their Wisconsin competition. They have kept parents informed while keeping teachers sane; their EduClimber program saves teachers time by pushing out results and strategies to parents automatically. And the teachers they are hiring graduate with a superior education to other options. The National Council on Teacher Quality rates the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point's literacy instruction textbook "exemplary," unlike those of schools like the Universities of Wisconsin-Madison or -Parkside.

It does not get any better than that. Coupling these wise decisions on childhood literacy with the Wausau workforce's potent classroom teachers could make Wausau the face of literacy improvement in Wisconsin.

## THE CENTER OF ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

A pattern emerges: the inertia in other large Wisconsin school districts is not found in Wausau. District and choice schools alike are seeing students recover from the pandemic, are resisting downward demographic trends, and are setting themselves up to be the state's education leaders.

North-central Wisconsin is on the verge of being the center of academic excellence in Wisconsin. As Wisconsin continues to change, outsiders should examine how Wausau is defying the odds and how great city schools can drive growth for families, businesses, and happiness.







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