

Master Document
A Critical Look at Wisconsin Public Education

How are Wisconsin students performing in reading and math?

As a state, Wisconsin is about at the national average. but this gives no satisfaction if the national average is not high enough. The new book, *US Education Is in Trouble, Let's Fix It! 22 Reform Proposals* ¹ provides extensive evidence to establish that US public schools are not performing well.

This report will focus on how many students fail the reading and math exams. If these numbers are high, then we know the Wisconsin averages are not as high as they should be.

Most assessment exams report results grouped in defined classifications. These are Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Below Basic. This report will define a Below Basic score as a failing score.

Reading

Social promotion is the phrase used to describe the movement of a student into the 4th grade when they cannot pass the reading exam. In 2022, **37%** of Wisconsin fourth graders failed the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Since the exam is given in the winter of the 4th grade, all the test takers had been promoted and many students carried with them their inadequate level of reading proficiency.² They will most likely never catch up with reading; a curse for the rest of their lives. This must be stopped; it is ruining lives!

Using the Wisconsin State FORWARD exam, in 2022-2023, **22.2%** of the 4th graders failed the English Language Arts exam.

In the same year, 2022, **28%** of all Wisconsin 8th graders failed the NAEP reading exam.³ (Twelfth grade data is not available) These students were now in the 8th grade and still many cannot read.

Again, in 2022, **30%** of all Wisconsin 8th graders failed the NAEP math exam.⁴ (Twelfth grade data is not available)

More Wisconsin FORWARD State Test Results

¹ Garrett, Richard W, published by Rowman and Littlefield, released August of 2024.

² : <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading/nation/achievement/?grade=4>

³ <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2022/pdf/2023010WI8.pdf>

⁴ <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2022/pdf/2023011WI8.pdf>

Wisconsin administers its own assessment exams. They use several exams, but we will look at scores from the **FORWARD** state tests. These tests are given to all students grades 3 to 8.

In 2022-23, **24.6%** of all students grades 3 to 8 failed the English Language Arts exam.

In the same year, **26.8%** of all students grades 3 to 8 failed the mathematics exam.

Data for 9th and 10th Graders – these results are averages for both grades together.

The state of Wisconsin is particularly fond of the ACT exam.⁵ All but a small percentage of their high school graduates take this exam as well as a two-year series of preACT tests. Here are some 9th and 10th grade preACT results for the state.

Wisconsin had relatively higher reading results with **18.3%** failing.

The preACT math failure rate was **28.3%**.

The Impact of Poor test Scores – Thousands of Students are Failing

In 2019-2020 Wisconsin had 855,000 students in grades 1-12. Assuming an even distribution of students in all grades, there were about 71,250 at each grade level. Here is a table to show the student impact for each of the above exams.

Table 1. Student Impact of Test Failure 2022-2023						
Row Number	Test	Grade	Failure Percent	Number of Students Tested	Students Failing	
1	NAEP Reading Social Promotion	4 th	37	71,250	26,362	
2	FORWARD Eng. Lang. Arts Social Promotion	4 th	22.2	56,111	12,436	
3	NAEP Reading	8 th	28	71,250	19,950	
4	NAEP Math	8 th	30	71250	21,375	

⁵ There are two major exams used to admit students into universities, the SAT exam, and the ACT test. Wisconsin uses the ACT exam on all but a small percentage of their high school students.

5	WI's FORWARD Eng. Lang. Arts	3-8 Average	24.6	All students grades 3 - 8 427,500	105,165
6	WI's FORWARD Math	3-8 Average	26.8	All students grades 3 - 8 427,500	114,570
7	preACT Reading	9&10 Average	18.3	131,923	24,121
8	preACT Math	9&10 Average	28.3	131,923	37,334

Here is a recap of the performance of Wisconsin students:

Rows 1 and 2 should give the same result. Both tests are given to 4th graders but the results are dramatically different. The NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Performance) exam is used in all 50 states so it is comparable state to state. Since the Wisconsin FORWARD exam is unique to Wisconsin, it would be appropriate for a study team to determine which test should drive the decisions of the state. If strict social promotion laws are put into place work is needed to determine if the state is failing 26,436 or is 12,436 the correct number?

Row 3 shows that there have been some reading improvements from the 4th grade to the 8th. The NAEP score drops from 37% to 28% - this is good news but the numbers are still too high. The optimum answer for reading score failures should be near zero. All students must be able to read by the time they move into the 4th grade.

Row 4 shows the 8th grade math failure percent for Wisconsin. Contrast it to rows 6 and 8.

Rows 5 and 6. Wisconsin administers the FORWARD assessment exam to all students in grades 3 to 8. Each grade has its own failing score but Wisconsin lumps all failing scores for all grades and divides it by the number of test takers. In this case, for math, there were 114,570 failures in all grades and 427,500 took the exam. *These are written exams, if a large percentage of the students are not good readers, we should not be surprised that their poor reading abilities produce poor test scores. Fix reading and test scores will go up.*

Rows 7 and 8. One of the big advantages to looking at these test scores is that they are administered closer to graduation encompassing grades 9 and 10. Here again, just like rows 4 and 5, these are averages for the two grades combined. Both scores are too

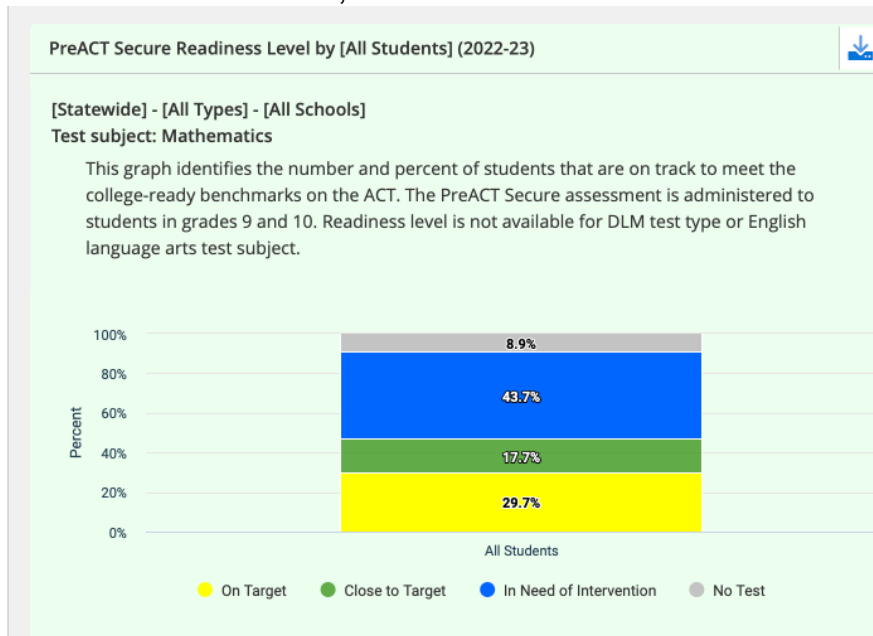
high – the state will be graduating 24,121 student who do not have the proper reading skills and 37,334 without the proper math scores.

It is interesting to note that 25% of US adult high school graduates have the reading skills of a 10- year-old student.⁶ This again proves the point that most students who can't read going into the 4th grade will NEVER catch up.

Are Wisconsin Students Ready for College?

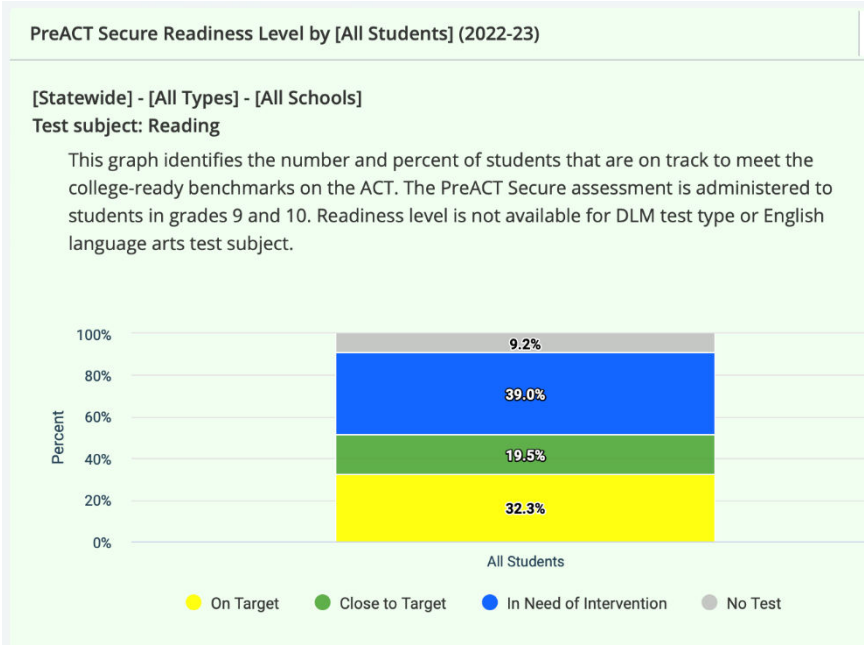
The answer to the above question is no, many are not. The first graph⁷ below shows **43.7%** of Wisconsin students need math remediation (intervention) before they can properly perform in college; this is **57,678** students. The second graph below is reading. The assessment is that **39%**, or **51,432**, Wisconsin students need remediation in reading before attending college This is way out of line; why should so many high school graduates need remediation – what is wrong with their uptake of reading and math? Wisconsin should take a serious look at their system and fix this problem.

The actual graphs from the Wisconsin Dept of Public Instruction are shown because these results are so bad; the source data needs to be seen to be believed.



⁶ National Center for Educational Statistics, Highlights of PIAAC 2017 US Results, Figure 5B, <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/nationalresults.asp>, the global ranking were derived from using data from all 38 countries on a spreadsheet.

⁷ <https://wisedash.dpi.wi.gov/Dashboard/dashboard/22551> To obtain this graph be sure the subject is set to math. No such graph exists for reading.



College Ready Students

This discussion will focus on College and Career Readiness, CCR. It is important to understand that the definition of college is any form of study the student selects upon graduation. It could be a nine-month program all the way up to admission is a university working for any type of degree, not necessarily a 4-year program.

A common test given to Wisconsin high school 11th graders is the ACT exam.⁸ The ACT parent company presents threshold minimum scores by topic that help to predict a student’s success in college. Almost all Wisconsin graduates take the ACT exam. Looking only at reading and math, about **36%** of the students taking the Wisconsin 2022 and 2023 ACT test had scores better than the minimum, in other words, the test predicts 36% of all Wisconsin students, each year, will succeed in college. So, by this measure the College and Career Ready (CCR) score for Wisconsin is **36%**.

Another method of estimating a CCR score for a state is to define that a student is ready for college if their test performance is proficient or above. Here is a table giving the numbers used to determine CCR.

Table 2.

2022-2023 pre ACT Scores for Grades 9 and 10				
	Number taking test			131923
	Reading	Math	% Reading	% Math
No test	12,200	11,803	9.2%	8.9%
Below Basic	24,121	37,301	18.3%	28.3%
Basic	43,547	38,645	33.0%	29.3%
Proficient	38,901	31,725	29.5%	24.0%
Advanced	19,154	12,449	10.0%	9.4%
		Sum	100.0%	100.0%

⁸ There are two such tests given to high schoolers, the SAT and the ACT. Wisconsin prefers the ACT because it measures student knowledge of English, math, etc.

From this table we deduce a reading CCR of **39%** and a math score of **33%**.

So, What is Wisconsin’s college and career readiness score?

Table 3. Estimation of CCR Scores for Wisconsin High School Graduates		
Test Used	Score	Comments
ACT Min acceptable test scores Reading	41%	These are the students who have high enough test scores; implies 59% do not
ACT Min acceptable test scores Math	31%	These are the students who have high enough test scores; implies 69% do not
PreACT Reading Grades 9 and 10	39%	Says, based on reading test performance 39% of Wisconsin students are ready for more study
PreACT Math Grades 9 and 10	33%	Says, based on reading test performance 33% of Wisconsin students are ready for more study
ACT actual Eng Lan Arts	37.7	This score is from the final ACT test before graduation
ACT Actual Math	26.9	This score is from the final ACT test before graduation

From the above table, the Wisconsin CCR measure is **35%** if we average the numbers presented in the table. This is the final estimate for Wisconsin.

Hope for Wisconsin Employers

Each year, Wisconsin graduates about 58,500 and sends about 27,000 to college.⁹ Using a 55%¹⁰ graduation rate for these students, 14,850 should be successful college graduates. So, 27,000 went to college but only 14,850 graduated producing a missing 12,150 students. More importantly what happens to the 31,500 that opted not to go to

⁹<https://sstar.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/WI-College-Enrollment.pdf>, Table 2

¹⁰ <https://www.univstats.com/states/wisconsin/>

college? A good counseling system and a sound vocational skills program might have diverted many of these no college and lost college attempters into a vocational program, thus giving Wisconsin employers up to 43,650 potential candidates. They need to no longer ask “Where am I going to find my future employees?”

In Conclusion

This report does not paint a pretty picture of Wisconsin public education. Tens of thousands are failing reading and math exams, only 36% graduate ready to go to college or a certified career. Wisconsin must rise up and demand a top-flight education program. A reform commission should be established that will produce a comprehensive plan, like the State of Maryland.

Then there’s the topic of teachers, fewer and fewer young people are opting for a career in education. One urgent need is to “clean up the classrooms” so they are safe and provide adequate time for teachers to teach. It will take years to get these young people as trained teachers willing to go into a classroom. Start now to make the needed changes!

The 22 proposals provided in my book provide some hope that our students can be better served, and that the students can be provided with the education they deserve.

Richard W. Garrett PhD
March 21, 2024
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Appendix – Is There a Covid Effect?

Since most children taking tests in all grades have gone through the Covid epidemic, is there a negative impact on their test scores?

Here is a table of reading test scores from various time periods. Regrettably, the data availability is not good but conclusions can be drawn from what we have.

Wisconsin schools were ordered closed in March 2020. Reopening began early in 2021 with various methods by difference schools. So, 2019- 2020 and 2020-2021 years are suspect. As one scans the data presented below, there is certainly not a huge Covid effect. PreACT reading scores improved. Other scores showed a 2-4% point worsening. With state data like this a 1%-point change is important.

WI Test Scores Over Time - All Scores Are test Failure Percentages								
Test	Grade	2022-2023	2021-2022	2020-2021	2019-2020	2018-2019	2003	1998
NAEP Reading	4	37		34				31
Forward								
EL		22.2						
NAEP Reading	8	28			24			22
NAEP Reading								
Math	8	30			24		25	24
Forward ELA	3 to 8	24.6	26.1	22.1	NA	23.2		
Forward math	3 to 8	26.8	28.1	29.7	NA	23.9		
preACT Reading	9 to 10	18.3		23.2	21.7			
preACT Math	9 to 10	28.3		NA	23.9	23.1		

Conclusion – the Covid effect on Wisconsin scores is a factor but not enough to negate the conclusions of this paper.