

EDUCATION

Study praises Wisconsin for raising the bar on state exams

<https://archive.jsonline.com/news/education/study-praises-wisconsin-for-raising-the-bar-on-state-exams-b99461053z1-296230891.html>

March 13, 2015

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By [Erin Richards](#) of the *Journal Sentinel*

Eight years ago, [a study](#) found Wisconsin had one of the lowest bars in the country for rating students proficient in reading and math on the state standardized test.

That means children here looked more academically accomplished than they probably really were — something the state aimed to remedy by [raising the scores](#) needed for students to attain rankings of advanced, proficient or basic on the annual state test.

[That effort](#) has been applauded by a [new study](#) noting that Wisconsin aggressively tightened its state test proficiency standards by 2013, ranking it second in the nation behind New York for the rigor of its expectations.

This spring, Wisconsin is administering a new state test tied to the [Common Core State Standards](#) — 17 other states are administering the same test — which will have a common bar for proficiency. Wisconsin raised the bar on its

old state test largely to prepare everyone for the switch to the tougher new test.

That's partly what led Harvard University researchers Paul E. Peterson and Matthew Ackerman to suggest that the [Common Core standards](#) are responsible for states raising the bar for proficiency on their individual state tests between 2011 and 2013.

Wisconsin adopted the standards in 2010, and joined one of two consortia of other states committed to administering tougher, common tests tied to the new grade-level expectations in English and math.

The study found Wisconsin's new bar for proficiency to be as strong or stronger than the bar used by a [respected national standardized exam](#). The researchers conclude that if student performance on the tests shifts upward on the heels of the proficiency standards being tightened, it will "signal a long-awaited enhancement in the quality of the American school."

As optimistic as that sounds, the realities of implementing new academic standards and tests in Wisconsin has not been easy.

Raising the bar for proficiency in the 2012-'13 school year meant that a lot of Wisconsin students suddenly looked like they hadn't passed the state tests, which perplexed parents.

The Common Core standards have taken a political beating in the state, especially in 2014.

And the new Common Core-aligned state test being administered for the first time this month has hit [a number of stumbling blocks](#). The cost to administer the tests went over budget. A key technological feature of the exam could not be developed in time.

This week, the state [Department of Public Instruction](#) told districts that performance task activities on the English portion of the exam — marketed as a better way to assess children's critical thinking skills than fill-in-the-bubble questions — would be dropped, as well.

The upside? Dropping the performance tasks will reduce the amount of time children in third through eighth grade spend taking the test by 2 1/2 hours, according to Deputy State Superintendent Mike Thompson.

He told school administrators in an email this week that the change would not affect students' overall test results.

"The Badger Exam is a good test and will give us our first insight into how our students are doing on more rigorous standards," the email said.



About Erin Richards

Erin Richards covers K-12 education in urban and suburban Milwaukee, as well as state politics related to education issues.

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