

EDUCATION

# Student scores slip with new proficiency benchmarks

Wisconsin moving toward nationally accepted standards

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

The percentage of Wisconsin public school students considered proficient or advanced in reading and math dropped suddenly Tuesday - from around 80% to less than 50% - based on higher expectations for student performance adopted by the state Department of Public Instruction and applied to the latest 2011 state achievement test.

The recalibrated proficiency levels released Tuesday by the DPI are a first look at how the picture of school performance in Wisconsin will change under a new school accountability system, part of an approved plan that freed Wisconsin from key mandates of a federal education law that required 100% student proficiency in reading and math by 2014.

In exchange, the state proposed a more holistic system for measuring school progress, and also raised the benchmark for proficiency on the annual Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination to correlate with the respected National Assessment of Educational Progress.

The results: Only 35.8% of Wisconsin's WKCE test-takers in third through eighth and 10th grade in fall 2011 scored proficient or better in reading, and just 48.1% scored proficient or better in math.

Compare that with March, when the state released 2011 WKCE results that showed 78% and 82% of students scored proficient or better in math and reading.

Under the new benchmarks, just 41.9% of white students scored proficient or advanced in reading, and 55.2% met that mark in math on the latest state test. Previously, more than 87% of white students were considered proficient or better in reading, and 84.3% were considered to have scored proficient or better in math in 2011.

As for the state's black students - many of whom attend Milwaukee Public Schools - 13.4% are considered proficient or advanced in reading, down from 58.7% using the old grading scale.

Rep. Steve Kestell, a Republican from Elkhart Lake who chairs the Assembly's Education Committee, called the revised picture of student performance a "necessary and long-delayed wake-up call for Wisconsin."

"We've been trying to tell folks for some time that we've been looking at things through rose-colored glasses in Wisconsin," he added. "It was a hard thing to communicate, and it was largely ignored. This is a new awakening."

State Sen. Luther Olsen (R-Ripon), who chairs the Senate Education Committee, said: "We've known for years that our proficiency-cut scores are

way below where they should be, and really, this shows that we have got to do a better job."

Under the past decade of No Child Left Behind, Wisconsin had been criticized for having a more lenient bar for proficiency than other states.

John Johnson, speaking for the DPI, explained that the old cut scores were developed 10 years ago, and they were based on what students were expected to know at that grade level.

The state is now switching to proficiency scores that are focused more on what students need to know to be ready for college and careers, said Tony Evers, state superintendent of public instruction.

"While adjusting to new, higher expectations will take time and effort, this is a necessary change that will ultimately help our schools better serve all students and links with our introduction of new standards, new assessments and other reforms," Evers said in a statement.

Johnson from the DPI said the new cut scores are based on performance-level descriptors that define proficient as being able to handle challenging subject matter and respond with sophisticated answers to a variety of problems.

School-level data using the new benchmarks is not yet available.

The state is also changing the grading scale at the same time that its [federal waiver](#) from certain mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, recently granted by the U.S. Department of Education, allows it to move away from judging schools primarily on what percentages of students are proficient in reading and math.

Under the No Child law, that percentage was required to increase each year toward the 100% proficiency goal, an unrealistic target that meant most schools in most states eventually would be out of compliance.

With Congress failing to reauthorize the law, the Obama administration offered states the opportunity to create new systems of measuring school performance that were more holistic.

A key feature of Wisconsin's new accountability system is school report cards that consider three years' worth of student achievement, as well as growth in test scores from year to year, progress in closing achievement gaps among subgroups of students, and measures that indicate whether a school's students are on track to graduate from high school and pursue college or careers.

The state released sample school report cards with dummy data on Tuesday. It intends to release report cards to schools with actual data in October.

The priority areas of achievement, growth, closing gaps and being on track for graduation will contribute to an overall score between 0 and 100, which will place schools in one of five categories indicating how well the school is meeting expectations.

"Annual measurable objectives" in the new accountability system call for schools to increase the percentages of students who are proficient in core academic subjects, but they won't be a part of the school's overall index score on the report card.

The higher benchmark scores necessary to reach the proficient or advanced performance levels on the WKCE will be applied for two more years. After that, Wisconsin will introduce a new state test in 2014-'15 aligned with a common set of academic standards that have been adopted by most states.

Kestell said the additional features included in Wisconsin's new accountability system will now allow it to be more accurately compared with other states.

"I think that along with the more accurate picture of our proficiency, the growth measurements (for each school) are going to become critical," he said.

"We'll be able to see who's doing a better job of getting certain students up to speed, and who needs more help. It's not about finding ways to disparage or embarrass anyone, it's about finding out who is doing really well and spreading that methodology around."

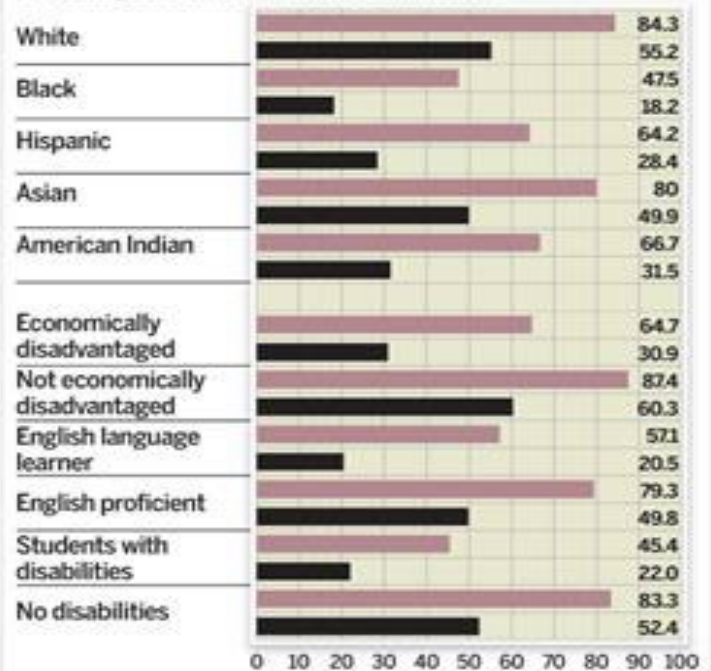
Gov. Scott Walker praised the new accountability system outline, saying it would give parents honest and uniform information about how schools are doing.

The next round of student-level data won't be available until the spring of 2013, based on the WKCE testing scheduled to take place in November.

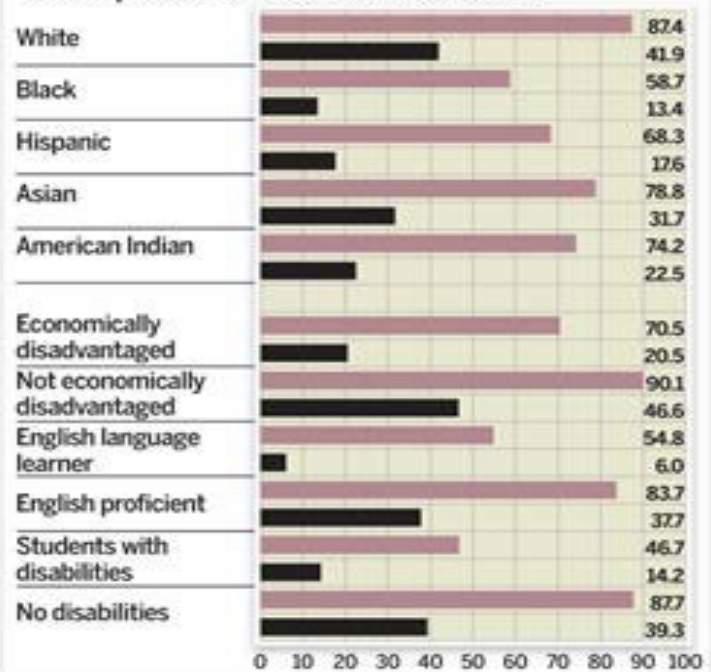
## State switches to higher proficiency standards for public schools

■ FALL 2011 WKCE SCORES USING OLD BENCHMARKS  
 ■ FALL 2011 WKCE SCORES USING NATIONALLY ALIGNED BENCHMARKS

### Percent proficient or advanced in MATH:



### Percent proficient or advanced in READING:



Source: State Department of Public Instruction

Journal Sentinel



**About Erin Richards**

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