



Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance

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NEWS

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Wisconsin Students Show Gains in Math, Reading WISTAX Analyzes Four Years of Test Scores for 2008-09 Sixth Graders

MADISON—A total of 83.3% of Wisconsin's sixth graders were proficient or advanced on the 2008-09 reading portion of the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exam (WKCE). That percentage was up 2.7 points from 80.6% in 2005-06, when these same students were third graders. In math, these students gained 4.6 points, from 71.9% in 2005-06 to 76.5% in 2008-09. These are some of the findings in a new Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance (WISTAX) report that tracks the progress of students in reading and math over four years. Now in its 78th year, WISTAX is a nonpartisan, nonprofit policy-research organization dedicated to citizen education.

The study, "Are Wisconsin Students Progressing?" tracks the WKCE reading and math scores for individual groups of students over the four years of schooling ending in 2008-09. Although the focus was on students who were third graders in 2005-06 (and thus sixth graders in 2008-09), WISTAX researchers note that gains were also achieved by 2005-06 fourth and fifth graders as they matured. The exception was seventh graders whose math and reading scores dropped significantly when they reached 10th grade in 2008-09. According to WISTAX President Todd Berry, "This study is unique in that it looks at the progress of a group of students over time. Previous studies of test scores compared different groups of students in different years; e.g., fourth graders in one year to fourth graders in the next."

The new report also examines test results by student characteristics. In math, black students increased proficiency levels by 6.9 percentage points, compared to 4.2% for white students, 3.7 points for Hispanics, and 6.5 percentage points for Asian students. However, the percentage of black students (44.2%) who were proficient or advanced remained below other groups: white (83.0%); Hispanic (59.1%); and Asian (77.1%). In reading, gains were the largest for Asian (+3.9) and white (+3.0) students. Hispanic (2.0) and black (+0.9) students gained less.

In both reading and math, economically disadvantaged students, those from families with income less than 185% of poverty, had larger gains than those who were not disadvantaged. Disadvantaged students gained 2.7 percentage points in reading and 5.0 in math. Students with higher family incomes gained 1.1 and 4.9 percentage points, respectively. Despite the gains, disadvantaged students still had lower proficiency levels in both reading (69.3% vs. 88.9%) and math (59.6% vs. 85.8%).

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The Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance, founded in 1932, is the state's oldest and most respected private government-research organization. Through its research, publications, civic lectures, and school talks, WISTAX aims to improve Wisconsin government through citizen education. Nonprofit, nonpartisan, and independently funded, WISTAX is not affiliated with any group—national, state, or local—and receives no government support.

The results were somewhat mixed when individual school districts were analyzed. In reading, 217 of 320 districts studied showed gains over the four years. WISTAX researchers limited their study to districts with at least 30 students in each grade because, in small districts, results from a few students can move the percentages widely. Northwood and Bruce had the largest reading gains, increasing their proficiency levels more than 24 percentage points each. In Northwood (southern Douglas County), less than half of 2005-06 third graders were proficient or advanced in reading. By 2008-09 when this group was in sixth grade, 82.9% were. Bruce (Rusk County) improved its reading proficiency level from 55.6% to 80.0%. Other districts with notable reading gains included Fennimore (+17.9 points), Richland (+17.5), Grantsburg (+14.3), and Stoughton (+12.6). Results for all districts studied can be found on the WISTAX Web site (www.wistax.org/facts).

Not all districts had reading gains. Eight had declines of at least 10 percentage points: Almond-Bancroft, Ashland, De Soto, Johnson Creek, Medford, Menominee Indian, Southwestern, and Sparta. In Ashland, De Soto, Johnson Creek, Menominee Indian, and Southwestern, there were somewhat large changes in the number of students taking the test, which can affect test scores.

In math, 219 of 320 districts showed gains from third to sixth grades. Seven districts had gains of at least 20 percentage points: Alma Center, Cambria-Friesland, Necedah, Northwood, Parkview, Richland, and Saint Francis. Ninety districts had gains in all three years, with 13 of those having double-digit gains.

A total of 15 districts had 2008-09 sixth-grade math scores that were at least 10 percentage points lower than third-grade scores three years earlier: Ashland, Baraboo, Durand, Gillett, Glendale-River Hills, Johnson Creek, Ladysmith-Hawkins, Marathon City, Menominee Indian, Nekoosa, Silver Lake J1, Siren, Stratford, Three Lakes, and Wisconsin Dells.

When looking at the two tests combined, the results were generally positive. Of 320 districts studied, WISTAX found that 167 (52.2%) had increased scores in both reading and math, with 15 gaining double digits in each. Northwood led the way, with increases of more than 30 percentage points on each test. Only 50 (15.6%) had declines in both. The remaining districts had gains in one of the two tests.

A free copy of *The Wisconsin Taxpayer* titled “Are Wisconsin Students Progressing?” is available by contacting WISTAX at 401 North Lawn Avenue., Madison, WI 53704-5033; e-mailing wistax@wistax.org; visiting www.wistax.org; or phoning 608.241.9789.

(An electronic version of this release is available at www.wistax.org)