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A monthly review of Wisconsin government, taxes, and public finance

The Wisconsin Taxpayer



Student Testing in Wisconsin

IN BRIEF

As the Wisconsin weather begins to turn, students statewide turn their attention to standardized tests. In October and November, students in grades three through eight and grade 10 take the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exams (WKCE). Meanwhile, many high school seniors and juniors will take the ACT college entrance exam. With increased political attention to student performance, it is only natural to compare Wisconsin results with those of other states. Some key findings include:

- Wisconsin students, like those in many other states, score significantly higher on state tests (70% to 80% proficient) than on national ones (30% to 40% proficient).
- Students in Wisconsin score above average on the ACT college entrance exam, though state comparisons can be misleading because test-taking rates vary from state to state.
- Despite unchanged statewide scores on the 2006 WKCE, many districts saw big changes.

Also in this issue:

Wisconsin Notes: State Business Tax Climate 38th; Historical Books To Be Online

WISTAX Focus: State Budget on Autopilot?; Celebrating the Constitution

Wisconsin's Working Families

Wisconsin Notes

■ **State Business Tax Climate Rated 38th.** Wisconsin's business tax climate ranks 38th best in the nation, according to an October 2006 report from the Washington-based Tax Foundation. The study evaluated states based on five major taxes that affect business: corporate income, individual income, sales, property, and unemployment insurance. The Badger State ranked in the bottom half on each of these taxes, faring best on the sales tax (27th) and worst on the individual income tax (42nd).

The top four states (Wyoming, South Dakota, Alaska, and Nevada) all were without two major taxes. Alaska has no individual income or state sales tax, while the other three have no individual or corporate income taxes. Among Wisconsin's neighbors, Illinois (25th) and Michigan (27th) were ahead of the Badger State; Minnesota (41st) and Iowa (43rd) trailed.

While research often finds that tax climate plays some role in business location decisions, the magnitude of that role is debated. Other factors, such as regulatory climate, labor costs, and worker skills, are also important.

■ **Historical Books To Be Online.** The Wisconsin Historical Society and the University of Wisconsin-Madison have teamed up with Internet-search company Google to make available online nearly 500,000 historical books and documents. Having been published before 1923, none of the publications are copyrighted. The university is considering making copyrighted texts available online, although that may face legal roadblocks as major publishers are suing Google for copyright infringement.

WISTAX Focus

■ **State Budget on Autopilot?** In recent years, most state spending has been in two areas: school aids and Medical Assistance (MA). In "State budget increasingly on autopilot" (*Focus* #21-06), WISTAX addresses the biennial battle between funding for these two programs and for other state priorities. The report notes that the link between state school aid, school revenue limits, and property taxes combined with accelerating MA costs assures that most new state revenue is "spoken for." As a result, funds for state agencies, higher education, and other programs are likely to grow little, if at all.

■ **Celebrating the Constitution.** In "Celebrating our Constitutional rights," WISTAX marks Constitution Day by reprinting the Bill of Rights along with other key constitutional amendments. The freedoms that many of us take for granted are provided by these amendments.

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Student Testing in Wisconsin

INTRODUCTION

Wisconsin students take standardized tests throughout their K-12 education. Results are used to measure and compare academic achievement of students, schools, districts, and states.

High school students who wish to continue their education at a four-year college also take one of two college entrance exams: the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT, formerly Scholastic Aptitude Test) or the American College Test (ACT). While results of these tests are often used to compare states, they have more limited value for making state-to-state comparisons since not all students take them and since one test or the other may be favored in a particular state.

Testing has become such a part of the education landscape that it is important that parents, teachers, and taxpayers have some understanding of the subject. Key questions they often ask are:

- Who takes each of the tests?
- How are they scored?
- What do they measure?
- How do Wisconsin students compare?

WKCE: WISCONSIN'S TESTS

The Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exams (WKCE) are state-mandated tests taken by students in grades three through eight, as well as 10th. In each of these grades, students are tested on reading and math. In fourth, eighth, and 10th grades, they are also tested on science, social studies, and language arts.

The WKCE have been used to measure student progress since 1993-94. Originally, they were given to students only in fourth, eighth, and 10th grades. However, mandates from the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) required student testing in reading and math in third through eighth grades, and once in high school. As a result, the state tests were expanded in 2005-06 to include these grades.

Measurement and Scoring

Academic Standards. Wisconsin has developed academic standards (Wisconsin Model Academic Standards, or WMAS) in 18 subjects, ranging from math and science to dance and personal financial literacy. The standards refer to what the state believes students should know and be able to do in each subject. State law required all districts to have standards in place by August 1, 1998, in reading and writing, geography and history, math, and science. Districts could create their own standards or adopt the state's.

Measurement. The 2005-06 (and beyond) WKCE are designed to measure student progress toward the state standards. The tests are "criterion referenced," that is, designed to compare a student's strengths and weaknesses with the WMAS. The tests were created specifically for Wisconsin based on its standards.

Prior to 2005-06, the WKCE were generally "norm referenced." These types of tests compare an individual test-taker's score against others who have taken the test. The WKCE were "off-the-shelf" tests that were created from a national sample

Wisconsin tests students in grades three through eight and again in grade 10.

The WKCE track student progress toward state standards.

of test-takers. These exams allowed for comparisons between Wisconsin students and other students across the country.

Beginning in 2002-03, Wisconsin customized these national tests by adding some questions to ensure better coverage of WMAS. Beginning in 2005-06, the exams are completely customized for the state.

Scoring. Students are scored on their proficiency—minimal, basic, proficient, or advanced—in each subject. The scores required for each proficiency level were set in 2003 following a standards-setting workshop at the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and review by a panel of nationally recognized testing experts. The proficiency levels are defined below.

WKCE Proficiency Definitions

Advanced: Demonstrates in-depth understanding of academic knowledge and skills tested on WKCE.

Proficient: Demonstrates competency in the academic knowledge and skills tested on WKCE.

Basic: Demonstrates some academic knowledge and skills tested on WKCE.

Minimal: Demonstrates very little knowledge and skills tested on WKCE.

Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

Because of test changes in 2005-06, the scores for determining proficiency in prior years were no longer usable. To remedy this and to allow comparison of student progress over time, DPI adjusted the cutoff scores on each test so that the statewide percentage of students scoring in each proficiency category in 2005-06 was approximately the same as in 2004-05.

For schools, districts, and the state, WKCE scores are generally reported as the percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced. The federal NCLB law re-

quires all students to be at least proficient in reading and math by 2014.

While statewide the percentages of students testing at least proficient remained nearly unchanged, individual schools and districts could have increases or decreases in proficiency levels. District results for reading and math are examined beginning on page 5.

Test Changes—Good or Bad?

The 2005-06 test changes were both positive and negative. Those are now explored.

Alignment with Standards. Prior to 2005-06, the WKCE were loosely aligned with state standards. The off-the-shelf tests had some customization designed to cover the WMAS. However, the new tests are fully customized to completely align with state standards. As such, they provide better information about student progress toward those goals.

However, questions have been raised about Wisconsin's academic standards. A recent study gave the state a C for its English standards, a D for math, and an F for science. State officials have said that they are addressing the concerns and have started to revamp Wisconsin's decade-old standards.

Continuity and Comparisons. Wisconsin's testing history is one plagued by a lack of continuity. Tests were changed in 1996-97, in 2002-03, and again in 2005-06. In the two earliest cases, the changes made comparisons with prior years difficult. For example, test scores from 2002-03 and later are not comparable to earlier years. To compare scores from 1996-97 through 2001-02 with those from 1995-96 and earlier required a linking table.

Further, the WKCE prior to 2005-06 did not allow for comparison over time.

Students are graded as minimal, basic, proficient, or advanced.

The WKCE now allow for comparisons of students or groups of students over time.

For example, 10th-grade scores in 2004-05 were not necessarily comparable to eighth-grade scores taken by the same group of students two years earlier.

The 2005-06 redesign will allow for such comparisons. For example, next year, the fifth-grade results in reading and math can be compared to the prior year's results, when the same group was in fourth grade.

Also, because the WKCE now test students in third through eighth grades, student progress on reading and math can be assessed annually. However, the increased testing does come at a cost, both monetarily and in terms of class time.

What Do the Test Results Tell Us?

While testing provides some information about how students, schools, and districts are performing, the results should be used with caution. One reason is that test performance is strongly related to individual characteristics, such as parental education, family income, and parental involvement in student learning. Teachers play an important role in learning, but most research shows individual socioeconomic characteristics have a stronger relationship with test scores than do school factors.

To the extent that the WMAS are the appropriate benchmark for measuring student progress, the tests are likely a good barometer. However, districts with favorable characteristics—more students with highly educated parents or from high-income families—will often outperform other districts. If we simply compare districts on their scores each year, many of the same districts will appear at the top and at the bottom each time.

The new tests continue to allow these same comparisons. But they also allow for comparisons over time. Thus, in addition

to comparing districts on annual scores, we can also compare them on improvement over time.

2005-06 Results

As previously mentioned, the percentages of students testing proficient or advanced statewide was, by design, nearly unchanged from 2005-06. Test results for all tests and all grades are in the table below.

Statewide. Several observations can be made from the table. First, 10th graders tended to perform worse than students in earlier grades. This has been typical of WKCE results since they began.

Second, the percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced was typically highest in social studies and lowest in math. The 2005-06 exception was in eighth grade, where students struggled with the language arts test—only 66% were deemed at least proficient.

Reading and Math by District. While statewide scores did not change from 2004-05, those in many individual districts did. The chart on page 6 shows the number of districts with various changes in the percentage of fourth-grade students testing proficient or advanced in reading.

A total of 222, or 54% of the 410 districts with published results for both years, experienced minimal changes (2005-06 scores less than five percentage points higher or lower than 2004-05 results). However, 80 districts had swings of more than

Students tended to score highest on social studies tests and lowest in math.

WKCE Test Results
% Proficient or Advanced, 2005-06

	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	10th
Reading	80%	82%	83%	83%	84%	84%	74%
Math	72	73	73	73	74	73	70
Science	na	77	na	na	na	73	70
Language Arts	na	79	na	na	na	66	70
Social Studies	na	91	na	na	na	84	74

10 percentage points. The results were similar for the fourth-grade math test.

Small districts are particularly prone to large annual swings in these percentages. For example, in 2004-05, all 17 Argyle fourth graders tested at least proficient on the reading test. In 2005-06, two of 18 fourth graders tested basic, dropping its proficiency percentage to 88.8%. The swing of only two students resulted in a more than 11-point decline in its percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced.

Small districts can experience large test-score swings due to the performance of a small number of students.

In fact, 37 of the 50 districts with the largest one-year changes—either up or down—on the fourth-grade reading test had fewer than 50 fourth-grade students. Because these districts can experience such wide swings due to small student counts, the discussion here is limited to districts with at least 50 students eligible to take the test.

Fourth Grade. The table on page 7 shows the districts with the largest one-year point changes in fourth- (top half of table) and eighth- (bottom half) grade reading and math scores (percentage proficient or advanced). Three districts were among those with biggest gains on both fourth-grade tests: Black River Falls, Crandon,

and Oostburg. All three districts moved from below- to above-average in reading; Oostburg and Black River Falls did the same in math.

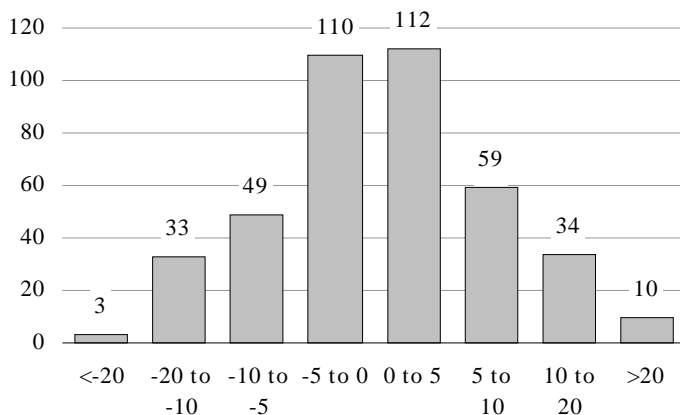
The reading and math gains among the top 10 districts were large. In reading, each of the 10 districts improved their proficiency levels by at least 10 percentage points. In math, the gains were at least 14 points. Further, nearly all had 2006 scores above the state average. The exceptions were Crandon and Spooner in math.

Among districts with the largest fourth-grade declines, four were in the top 10 in both reading and math: Brodhead, Darlington, New Glarus, and New Holstein. Among districts with at least 50 fourth graders, New Glarus had the largest point drops in both reading and math. It also had the largest decline in science and second-largest in language arts.

Eighth Grade. Among eighth graders, five districts were in the top 10 in both reading and math: Belleville, Bloomer, Colby, Freedom, and Necedah. Bloomer was second on both tests. Although the reading increases were not as large as those among fourth graders, changes in eighth-grade math scores were greater.

Among districts with the largest declines in eighth-grade scores, only Elk Mound, Mauston, and Nekoosa were among the top 10 on both tests. Elk Mound's 14.2 point decline in reading was the largest, while Mauston's 25.4 point decline was the biggest for math.

Most Districts Had Small Changes in Reading Scores
Count of One-Year Changes in % Proficient or Advanced,
2005-06 Fourth-Grade Reading



NATIONAL COMPARISONS

The WKCE tell us how Wisconsin students are performing relative to state standards. Other states have similar tests, which measure performance of their students against their standards.

Fourth and Eighth Grade Proficient plus Advanced Percentages

Districts* with Largest One-Year Changes, 2004-05 to 2005-06

		<i>Reading</i>			<i>Mathematics</i>			
		<i>Fourth Grade</i>						
		2006	2005	Ch.				
		2006	2005	Ch.	2006	2005	Ch.	
<i>Increases</i>	Crandon	82.8	61.9	20.9	Oostburg	86.4	67.9	18.5
	Oostburg	96.3	77.4	18.9	Crandon	69.0	50.8	18.2
	Phillips	89.6	73.2	16.4	Black River Falls	82.5	64.5	17.9
	Black River Falls	92.8	79.1	13.7	Colby	77.6	60.0	17.6
	Somerset	87.8	74.2	13.6	Brown Deer	79.6	62.4	17.2
	Kewaunee	83.1	70.1	12.9	Nekoosa	85.3	70.0	15.3
	Cambridge	97.0	84.7	12.3	Lancaster	83.6	68.6	15.0
	Genoa City J2	84.9	73.2	11.7	Denmark	89.1	74.2	14.9
	Waupun	92.9	81.4	11.5	Oconto	86.9	72.1	14.8
	Tomorrow River	92.6	81.8	10.8	Spooner	69.9	55.1	14.8
	State Avg.	82.0	81.7	0.3	State Avg.	72.7	72.6	0.1
<i>Decreases</i>	South Milwaukee	75.6	86.6	-11.0	Adams Friendship	62.7	77.3	-14.6
	Brodhead	76.9	88.3	-11.4	Wrightstown	70.4	85.0	-14.6
	Parkview	77.3	88.9	-11.6	Brodhead	59.0	76.6	-17.6
	Evansville	76.6	88.3	-11.8	Deerfield	79.2	97.6	-18.4
	Mount Horeb	77.0	89.0	-12.0	Darlington	75.0	94.2	-19.2
	New Holstein	80.3	92.6	-12.3	New Holstein	68.9	88.9	-20.0
	Palmyra Eagle	82.6	95.1	-12.5	Bristol #1	63.6	83.7	-20.0
	Darlington	80.8	94.2	-13.5	Menominee Indian	45.0	66.7	-21.7
	Bloomer	76.3	90.9	-14.6	Clinton	63.0	87.0	-24.1
	New Glarus	74.2	96.6	-22.4	New Glarus	61.3	88.1	-26.8
<i>Eighth Grade</i>								
		2006	2005	Ch.				
		2006	2005	Ch.	2006	2005	Ch.	
<i>Increases</i>	Belleville	95.5	78.5	17.0	Pittsville	77.4	50.0	27.4
	Bloomer	98.6	82.4	16.2	Bloomer	81.4	61.2	20.3
	Brodhead	94.4	80.0	14.4	Deerfield	88.7	68.8	19.9
	Colby	93.1	79.0	14.1	Colby	84.5	66.7	17.8
	Tomorrow River	93.9	80.6	13.3	Freedom	93.2	76.2	17.0
	Berlin	84.2	74.5	9.7	Necedah	78.1	62.1	16.0
	Freedom	94.2	84.8	9.4	Bristol #1	93.4	77.6	15.8
	Lodi	94.7	85.8	8.8	Belleville	85.1	69.6	15.5
	Necedah	85.9	77.3	8.7	Cudahy	78.5	63.2	15.3
	Iowa Grant	87.1	78.9	8.2	Medford	88.1	73.0	15.1
	State Avg.	84.8	84.5	0.3	State Avg.	74.8	73.9	0.9
<i>Decreases</i>	Nekoosa	79.8	89.2	-9.4	Kewaunee	77.6	90.1	-12.5
	Rice Lake	84.0	93.9	-9.8	Platteville	75.8	89.8	-14.0
	Menominee Indian	55.6	65.9	-10.3	Saint Francis	74.5	88.7	-14.2
	Marshall	78.9	89.2	-10.3	Barron	67.3	81.7	-14.4
	Union Grove J1	83.3	93.9	-10.6	Cameron	75.4	90.0	-14.6
	West Salem	82.1	93.7	-11.6	Richland	71.7	86.8	-15.1
	Whitehall	83.0	94.9	-11.9	Crandon	60.0	77.1	-17.1
	Mauston	74.8	86.7	-12.0	Elk Mound	62.5	81.8	-19.3
	Colfax	80.0	93.0	-13.0	Nekoosa	49.5	71.6	-22.1
	Elk Mound	80.4	94.5	-14.2	Mauston	41.7	67.2	-25.4

Despite little change in statewide average scores, some districts had large changes.

Five districts had large increases in both eighth-grade math and reading scores.

*Only districts with at least 50 students eligible to take the tests.

However, each state has different standards and expectations. For example, in 2005, 81% of Wisconsin fourth graders scored at least proficient in reading. Oklahoma claimed 91% of its fourth graders met that mark on their test. However, in Missouri, only 35% of students received “passing” grades. The main reasons for the large differences: different standards and different tests.

While individual state tests do not allow for state-to-state comparisons, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests do. These exams are a national assessment of what students know and can do in various subjects: reading, math, science, writing, U.S. history, civics, geography, and the arts. The tests are not given annually. For example, the math test was given in 1990, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2003, and 2005; reading was tested in 1992, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2003, and 2005.

Who Takes the NAEP?

Beginning in 2003, all states must participate in the NAEP. However, not all students take the tests. Rather, a “representative sample” of students from

each state participates. The sample is selected to be similar in characteristics to the statewide student population. This allows researchers to estimate what the results would be if all students—nationally or in a particular state—took the tests.

Proficiencies

While states differ in what defines student proficiency, NAEP tests have a uniform measurement. By most indications, NAEP’s definition of proficient is more difficult to reach than most state definitions.

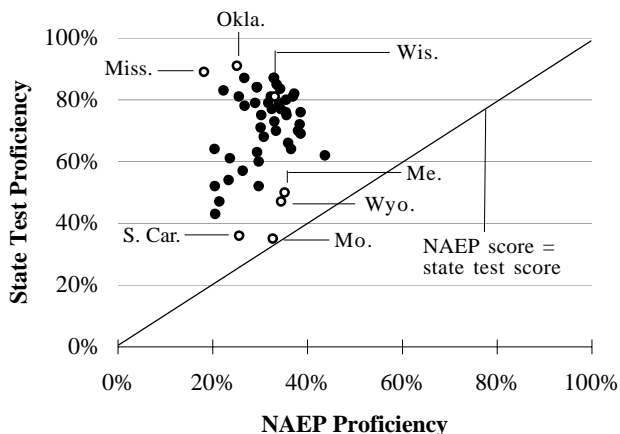
The chart (below, left) plots the percentage of fourth-grade students testing at least proficient on their 2005 state-mandated reading exam versus the percentage on the NAEP exam. For example, 81% of Wisconsin students were proficient or advanced on the state test, but only 33% scored at that level on the NAEP exam.

Every state had a higher percentage of students defined as proficient or better on the state exam than on the NAEP test. The difference between the state test score and the NAEP score is the “proficiency gap.” The further a state is above the diagonal line (where proficiencies are the same), the more state test results differed from the federal results.

Four states had proficiency standards near the federal standard: Maine (50% state test, 35% NAEP), Missouri (35%, 33%), South Carolina (36%, 26%), and Wyoming (47%, 34%). The two with the widest gaps were Mississippi (89%, 18%) and Oklahoma (91%, 25%), where the difference between the federal and state results was at least 66 percentage points.

Wisconsin (81%, 33%) was one of 16 states where the “proficiency gap” was 45 to 55 percentage points. The gaps in Iowa (73%, 33%), Illinois (63%, 29%), and Minnesota (70%, 38%) were less than the Bad-

National Standards Tougher Than State Standards?
% Prof. or Adv. on Fourth-Grade Reading,
2005 State Tests and NAEP



ger State's; Michigan's (79%, 32%) was higher.

Comparisons

Although Wisconsin's standards, like those in many other states, do not line up with the nation's, our students generally outperform those in many other states on the NAEP tests. The table at right shows the results of the 2005 NAEP reading and math tests for selected states. Both fourth- and eighth-grade results are included.

In 2005, Wisconsin fourth graders ranked 15th and 20th, respectively, on the two tests; eighth graders did slightly better (8th and 14th). On the fourth-grade math test, 40% of Wisconsin students scored proficient or advanced, compared to 35% nationwide. The difference was larger on the eighth-grade math test, where 36% of Wisconsin students received "passing" grades compared to 28% nationally. In reading, Wisconsin students outperformed students nationally by at least three percentage points.

Four states were in the top 10 on both tests in both grades. Massachusetts ranked first on all four tests. Minnesota was second on both math tests, and fifth (fourth grade) and sixth (eighth grade) on reading. New Jersey's and Vermont's results varied but were in the top 10 on all tests.

Among the states that performed the worst on the NAEP tests were Alabama, Louisiana, New Mexico, and Mississippi. In each of these states, less than one quarter of students scored at least proficient on the four exams.

COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMS

Testing does not end with 10th grade. Many students also take one or both of the major college entrance exams: the ACT or the SAT. Furthermore, results of these tests are often used to compare state education

Wisconsin Scores Above Average on NAEP Tests % Proficient or Advanced, 2005 NAEP, Selected States

	<i>Fourth Grade</i>				<i>Eighth Grade</i>			
	Math		Reading		Math		Reading	
	Pct.	Rk.	Pct.	Rk.	Pct.	Rk.	Pct.	Rk.
U.S.	35%		30%		28%		29%	
Massachusetts	49	1	44	1	43	1	44	1
Minnesota	47	2	38	5	43	2	37	6
Vermont	44	6	39	3	38	3	37	5
New Jersey	45	5	37	6	36	7	38	4
Wisconsin	40	15	33	20	36	8	35	14
Iowa	37	25	33	21	34	14	34	18
Michigan	38	24	32	27	29	30	28	31
Illinois	32	35	29	33	29	33	31	24
Alabama	21	48	22	45	15	48	22	45
Louisiana	24	47	20	49	16	47	20	47
New Mexico	19	50	20	48	14	49	19	48
Mississippi	19	49	18	50	14	50	18	49

systems. Because most Wisconsin high schoolers take the ACT rather than the SAT, the following discussion focuses on the former.

Who Takes the ACT?

The ACT is taken by high school juniors and seniors who are considering attending college after graduation. The test is generally taken by students in the spring of their junior year or fall of their senior year. Many college applications have to be in by early January of a student's senior year.

Nationally, only 40% of 2005-06 high school seniors took the ACT, while 49% took the SAT. However, those figures can be deceiving because the ACT is the dominant test in some states, particularly in the Midwest and the SAT in others, mainly on the east and west coasts.

The table on page 10 shows the percentage of 2005 high school graduates who took each of the tests. On the left are states where the ACT was the main college-entrance exam; on the right are SAT-dominated

Participation in College Entrance Exams Varies by State
 % of High-School Graduates Taking SAT or ACT, 2005

State	SAT	ACT	State	SAT	ACT
<i>ACT Is Primary Test</i>			<i>SAT Is Primary Test</i>		
Group Median	10%	70%	Group Median	72%	15%
Alabama	10%	77%	Alaska	52%	26%
Arkansas	6	76	Arizona	33	19
Colorado	26	100	California	50	14
Idaho	21	58	Connecticut	86	10
Illinois	10	100	Delaware	74	4
Iowa	5	66	Florida	79	41
Kansas	9	76	Georgia	75	29
Kentucky	12	76	Hawaii	61	16
Louisiana	8	85	Indiana	66	21
Michigan	10	69	Maine	75	10
Minnesota	11	68	Maryland	71	12
Mississippi	4	94	Massachusetts	86	12
Missouri	7	70	Nevada	39	28
Montana	31	57	New Hampshire	81	10
Nebraska	8	76	New Jersey	86	6
New Mexico	13	61	New York	92	17
North Dakota	4	82	North Carolina	74	15
Ohio	29	66	Oregon	59	12
Oklahoma	7	69	Pennsylvania	75	9
South Dakota	5	76	Rhode Island	72	8
Tennessee	16	92	South Carolina	64	38
Utah	7	68	Texas	54	29
West Virginia	20	65	Vermont	67	16
Wisconsin	6	69	Virginia	73	14
Wyoming	12	69	Washington	55	16

Student participation on the ACT and SAT varies widely by state.

states. Among states where the ACT was the main test, student participation ranged from 58% in Idaho to 100% in Colorado and Illinois, where full participation is mandated by the states. The median (half of scores lower, half higher) was 70%. Among states where the SAT was most prominent, participation on that test varied from 33% in Arizona to 92% in New York. The median for the SAT was 72%.

The figures in the table highlight the difficulties in using these tests to compare states on student achievement. If ACT results were used, the average score of only 4% of Delaware students would be compared with an average for all students in Colorado or Illinois. A similar problem

arises if the SAT were used for comparisons.

Even among states where the ACT is the major test, large variations in student participation can have a significant impact on average state scores.

Colorado and Illinois provide good illustrations of the relationship between average state test scores and student participation. Both states began requiring all students to take the ACT in 2002 and beyond. In 2001, 71% of Illinois high school graduates took it; 62% of Colorado graduates did. In that year, average state scores were 21.6 in Illinois and 21.5 in Colorado.

In 2002, when nearly all (99% in each state) students took the test, average scores in both states fell to 20.1. The average scores of those who normally would not have taken the test were between 16.0 and 16.5 in Illinois and between 17.5 and 18.0 in Colorado.

Because of this, it can be misleading to compare Wisconsin, where 69% of students took the ACT, with Colorado or Illinois (both 100%), or with Idaho (57%).

What Does the ACT Measure?

The ACT is very different from the WKCE and NAEP in terms of what it measures. The WKCE measure student progress toward a set of state standards; the NAEP tests track student achievement against a set of national standards. These standards are sets of knowledge and skills that policymakers believe all students should have.

The ACT tests a student's college-readiness, rather than performance against standards. It assesses whether a student has the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed at the college level. In addition, ACT results are reported as an absolute score: the number correct out of a possible 36 points.

ACT researchers have found that student test scores are related to the courses they take in high school. Students who take coursework in math, science, and language arts beyond what is required for graduation generally perform better on the test than students who take the minimum.

How Do Wisconsin Students Do?

In 2006, Wisconsin students averaged 21.5 points out of 36 on the ACT. This was second highest among states where the ACT was the dominant test. However,

% of Students Meeting ACT Benchmarks
Wis. and U.S., 2006

	Wis.	U.S.
English	77%	69%
Math	52	42
Reading	61	53
Science	35	27
All Four	28%	21%

caution should be used when using this figure to compare state schools with those in other states.

A more in-depth analysis of Wisconsin

scores points to some troubling figures. ACT (the organization that administers the test) has created benchmark scores for each of the four subtests—English, math, reading, and science. These benchmarks represent the minimum score needed to indicate a 50% chance of getting a B or higher (or 75% chance of obtaining a C or higher) in the corresponding college courses. Significant numbers of students, in Wisconsin and nationally, fail to reach these scores.

In 2006, slightly more than half (52%) of Wisconsin students who took the ACT reached the math benchmark (see table above) and only 35% reached the science benchmark. While these numbers were low, both were above national averages. Only 28% of students here, and 21% nationwide, scored above the ACT benchmarks on all four tests. These results suggest significant numbers of students are likely attending college without adequate preparation.

By District

Just as average scores and student participation vary by state, they also vary by school district. In six districts (Adams-Friendship, Butternut, Elmwood, Manawa, Menominee Indian, and Northwood), less than 30% of high school seniors took the 2006 ACT. In contrast, seven districts (Elmbrook, Gibraltar, Green Lake, Kohler, Maple, Shullsburg, and Whitefish Bay) had at least 80% of students take the test.

Average scores also varied. Kohler and Whitefish Bay had the highest average, both over 25. Meanwhile, three districts (Laona, Menominee Indian, and Milwaukee) had average scores under 18. Much of the variation among school districts was likely due to differing district demographics.

Less than 30% of students reach the ACT benchmarks on all four tests.

SUMMARY

Wisconsin students, like those from other states, take standardized tests throughout their K-12 years. However, differences in state standards, tests, and participation often make it difficult to make fair comparisons of student achievement.

The NAEP tests, given nationally, allow for interstate comparisons. Results show that: on a national scale, fewer than 40% of 2005 fourth- and eighth-graders tested “proficient” on the reading and math exams; and Wisconsin students scored above national averages, though fewer than 41% tested proficient. There is generally a wide gap between what states consider proficient and the national standard. While only 30% of students were deemed proficient on the NAEP’s fourth-grade reading test, state-designed tests generally found 60% or more of students to be proficient. □

ACT participation and scores varied by school district.

DATA SOURCE:

ACT, Inc.; College Board; U.S. Department of Education; Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

Wisconsin's Working Families

Wisconsin's labor force relies on dual-earner couples to a greater extent than most states. Census Bureau figures show that 58.8% of married couples in the state had both spouses working in 2005. That figure was eighth highest nationally and 6.7 percentage points above the U.S. average (see chart below).

Minnesota (61.6%) tied with North Dakota and Nebraska for the top spot, while Iowa (60.0%) was sixth. Michigan (52.0%) was the only Wisconsin neighbor below the national norm (52.1%).

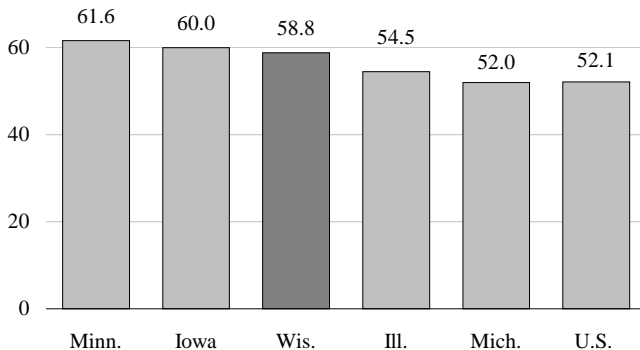
In Wisconsin, as in many other states, this high percentage translated into a sig-

nificantly larger labor force. Here, second earners were 22.3% of the workforce, also eighth highest nationally. North Dakota (24.3%) and Iowa (24.0%) led the nation. Second earners had a much smaller impact in California (16.9%) and New York (17.2%).

While one would expect income and earnings to play a role in households deciding whether both spouses should work, region seems to be more important. Of the top 10 states with two-earner couples, six were Midwestern/Northern Plains states (Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, North and South Dakota, and Wisconsin). A seventh, Colorado, borders the region. The other three states were in the Northeast (New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont).

Many southern states (Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Louisiana, New Mexico, and Oklahoma) were among those with the smallest percentage of two-earner couples. California, Hawaii, Kentucky, and West Virginia were also among the lowest states. □

Wisconsin High in Dual-Earner Married Couples
% of Married Couples With Both Spouses Working, 2005



DATA SOURCE:

U.S. Census Bureau; WISTAX calculations.



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