

STATE'S COLLEGE READINESS SLIPS

ACT scores released last fall show the share of Wisconsin high school juniors ready for college in 2018-19 was down or flat over the previous year for nearly all subjects and for almost all groups by race, ethnicity, or economic status. Despite the lack of progress, separate national data show Wisconsin doing relatively well on the ACT compared to other states that test all or nearly all students.

Recent Wisconsin Policy Forum research has shown the state's [working age population is shrinking](#) while many growing occupations [require higher levels of education](#). In a new analysis of recently released data from the state, we now find areas of concern with regard to Wisconsin's performance on an important education metric related to this challenge.

According to data from the state Department of Public Instruction, the share of high school students statewide whose ACT subject test scores indicate they are prepared for college courses in English, math, and science declined between 2017-18 and 2018-19, as shown in Figure 1. These numbers are also down relative to the 2014-15 school year, the first year in

which all Wisconsin high school juniors were required to take the ACT. Meanwhile, the percentage of students with college-ready reading skills increased slightly in the 2018-19 school year, returning to the same level as two years earlier.

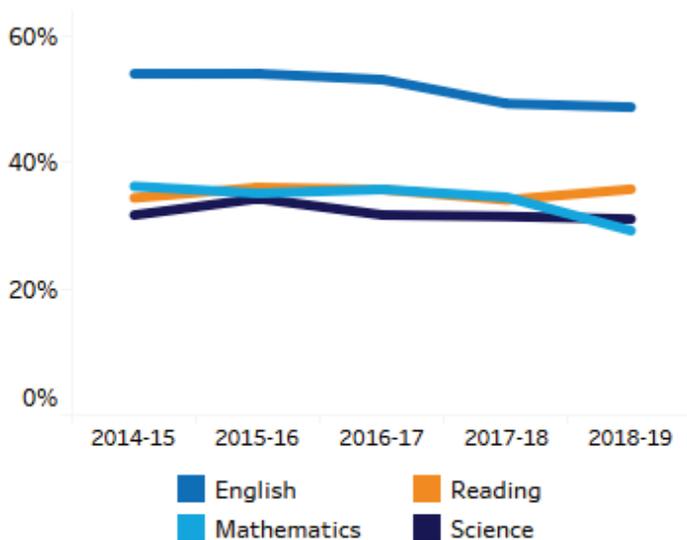
Despite the decline in the share of students meeting college readiness benchmarks in three of the four categories, it's important to note Wisconsin high schoolers still fare better on their overall ACT scores than nearly all other states that require all students to take the test. But within those statewide scores are gaping disparities, particularly on the basis of race, that demand urgent attention.

The Forum's analysis stems from the newly released [second edition of our School DataTool](#). The tool includes a new metric this year – an indicator of Wisconsin students' college readiness as measured by their scores on the ACT. The ACT is one of two major tests that colleges accept as part of students' applications. It is the more popular choice in the Midwest, while the SAT is more popular on the coasts.

In the past, the Forum analyzed average composite ACT scores at the district and statewide levels. The composite score is a weighted average of a student's scores on each of the four required sections of the test: English, math, reading, and science.

Wisconsin's state average composite score was 19.6 for 2018-19, which is a slight decline from the state average of 19.8 the year before and 20 in 2014-15. This modest decrease, however, is masking potentially significant declines within each subject area that are relevant to students' "college readiness."

Figure 1: Wisconsin ACT College-Readiness
% Students Meeting Benchmark By Subject



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction



The ACT establishes college readiness benchmarks in each of four subject areas, which indicate that a student has a “[50% chance of obtaining a B or higher](#) or [about a 75% chance of obtaining a C or higher](#)” in the corresponding first-year college course. Those benchmarks are a score of 18 (out of a possible 36) on the English section; 22 on the math section; 22 on the reading section; and 23 on the science section. There is no benchmark for the composite score.

ENGLISH

On the English portion of the ACT, which tests students’ knowledge of grammar and other writing conventions, just under half of all students (48.7%) met the benchmark to be considered college ready. That means a little less than one in two Wisconsin juniors would be expected to be prepared to earn C’s or better in a first-year English Composition course.

When we break down the data by race, we see a large gap on the English section between white students (57% meet the benchmark) and black students (13.3%). This is the largest gap between students by race for any of the four tests. Meanwhile, although college readiness has declined for all groups since 2014-15, Hispanic students show evidence of stabilizing or even bouncing back: 27.2% met the college readiness benchmark for English in 2018-19, up nearly a full percentage point over the previous year.

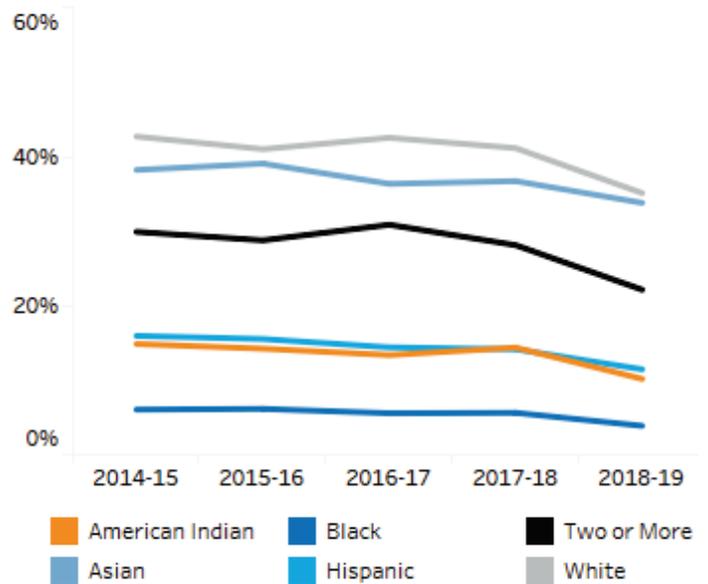
We also explored college readiness gaps among students based on economic status and found a 34 percentage point difference between those who are economically disadvantaged (26.8% were college ready) and those who are not (60.8% were ready) in 2018-19. That gap has remained largely the same over the last five years as both groups trend downward.

MATH

Only 29.2% of Wisconsin students met the college readiness benchmark in math in 2018-19, which indicates their level of preparation for college courses involving algebra, geometry, and statistics. This number had hovered around 35% since 2014-15, with some fluctuations in either direction, until the substantial decline in 2018-19.

The proportion of students meeting this benchmark declined from the previous year for students of all races. Thirty-five percent of white students statewide met the benchmark, with Asian students also coming in

Figure 2: Wisconsin ACT Math College-Readiness % Students Meeting Benchmark By Race or Ethnicity



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

above the state average at 33.8%. Alarming, 3.9% of black students met the college readiness benchmark in math, a decline from 5.6% the previous year (see Figure 2). The concern here is hard to overstate: by this one measure at least, fewer than one in 25 African American juniors in Wisconsin was ready to earn a C or better in an entry-level college math course.

For economic status, we again see similar trends for students who are and who are not economically disadvantaged, with both groups trending down. The share of economically disadvantaged students meeting the benchmark was 11.4% in 2018-19, compared to 39% for students who are not economically disadvantaged, for a gap of 27.6 percentage points.

READING

In contrast to the other subjects, the percentage of students statewide meeting the college readiness benchmark for reading improved over the previous year. Nearly 36% of all Wisconsin students achieved a score of 22 on this section, compared to 34.1% a year earlier. The section tests students’ understanding of key concepts in text excerpts as well as their understanding of text structure and their ability to integrate knowledge and ideas.

The 2018-19 school year saw improvements for white, Asian, and Hispanic students, while students identifying



as two or more races, American Indian, and black experienced slight declines. The largest gap, again between white and black students meeting the benchmark (42% versus 8.7%), was 33.3 percentage points.

Students who are not economically disadvantaged again met the benchmark at higher rates (45.2%) than students who are economically disadvantaged (18.5%), a 33.8 percentage point gap. Both groups showed improvement over the previous year.

SCIENCE

The percentage of students meeting the college readiness benchmark for the science section of the ACT remained stagnant after a peak in 2015-16. Thirty-one percent of students statewide are prepared for a college course in science based on this section of the ACT, which tests skills such as interpretation of data, scientific investigation, and students' ability to evaluate inferences and results of experiments.

While most race and ethnicity groups experienced a decline, the percentage of Hispanic and black students meeting the science benchmark improved slightly over the previous year to 12.3% and 4.6%, respectively. Still, the fact that so few of the state's Hispanic and black high school students are meeting the readiness benchmark for college science courses is alarming.

Similar to the overall trend, results by economic status remained largely the same, with less than half of a percentage point change for both groups. Just over 13% of students who are economically disadvantaged met the benchmark, compared to 40.8% of students who are not economically disadvantaged, a 27.6 percentage point gap.

A LOOK TO THE NATION

Using data on a somewhat different group of students – high school graduates who had taken the ACT at some point – ACT publishes national metrics for each of these measures. Like Wisconsin juniors, a smaller share of these graduates nationwide met benchmarks in 2018-19 in English, math, and science. Additionally, the share of students meeting the reading benchmark nationwide decreased by one percentage point in 2018-19.

Among the 19 states in which at least 98% of graduates took the ACT, Wisconsin graduates were second only to Minnesota in their composite scores and college readiness in English, reading, and science and placed sixth-highest for math. These national data do not allow for comparing the scores of racial and ethnic groups across states.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

The DPI data examined in this report show the share of Wisconsin high schoolers on track to graduate with the English, math, and science skills needed to succeed in college declined slightly between the 2017-18 and 2018-19 school years, part of an overall downward trend since 2014-15. Meanwhile, the overall rate of college readiness among all Wisconsin students statewide, depending on the subject, is as little as 29% and in no subject reaches 50%.

Raising further concern are the wide disparities in student outcomes on the basis of race, ethnicity, and economic status. While not all high school graduates attend college, previous Forum research found many of the state's [fastest-growing, highest-paying occupations](#) require college degrees. Furthermore, those who attend college unprepared to succeed in first-year courses in basic subjects risk needing to take remedial courses that could delay their graduation.

On the bright side, Wisconsin fares better than many other states in ACT achievement. Also, some promising efforts to address these challenges already are underway. For example, a statewide consortium of school districts is implementing a national initiative called *Redefining Ready!* to advance data-driven efforts to improve students' college readiness; and a Closing the Achievement Gap Consortium in metro Milwaukee is working to reduce that region's racial gaps.

Still, this brief underscores the urgency involved with such efforts. Few policy challenges are more critical to Wisconsin's economic health than meeting the growing demand for college-educated workers. At the same time, few policy solutions are as obvious as the need to boost the pipeline of high school graduates from within the state, particularly among minority and economically disadvantaged populations, who are equipped to go on to college and address that shortage. The data presented in this report show this solution remains elusive and will demand even greater attention from policymakers and citizens.

