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Student Absenteeism Rises Once Again and Test Scores Still Below Pre-Pandemic Levels

Updated School DataTool offers interactive data metrics on every Wisconsin public school district

Rates of chronically absent students continued to increase in Wisconsin schools in the 2021-22 school year, with the reported data rising even more sharply than during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Meanwhile, the share of students in grades 3 through 8 scoring proficient or advanced in English language arts (ELA) and math increased in 2021-22 across grade levels, but the percentage had not yet rebounded to pre-pandemic levels. High school student participation in the ACT test also increased that year, as did the share of students scoring 3 or higher on advanced placement exams.

These are among the key findings of the Wisconsin Policy Forum's updated School DataTool. This online interactive tool allows for comparison of each of the state's public school districts on metrics relating to student demographics and participation, school district finances, graduation rates, test scores, and other measures of student performance.

This latest edition of the tool is the fifth since its 2019 debut. The most recent available data are used for each metric, going through the 2021-22 school year for some indicators and 2022-23 for others. For example, a key data finding for the most recent school year (2022-2023) was that public school enrollment in the state declined for the ninth straight year, falling by more than 6,000 students.

While all the figures cited here are statewide, the interactive DataTool allows users to assess and compare how individual school districts are faring on each of these metrics. Here's a closer look at some of the statewide findings:

Absenteeism continues to increase: In 2021-22, the statewide absenteeism rate rose for the sixth straight time, continuing a particularly pronounced ongoing increase during the pandemic that [the Forum researched earlier this year](#). The absenteeism rate increased from 12.9% pre-pandemic in 2019-20 to 16.1% in 2020-21, then to 22.6% in 2021-22.

The absenteeism rate is the share of chronically absent students (students who were enrolled for at least 90 days and attended less than 90% of those days) out of all students who were enrolled for at least 90 days. Rates of absenteeism increased across all racial and ethnic groups, with the rate increasing the most for Black students, from 44.8% in 2020-21 to 58% in 2021-22.

Test scores remain below pre-pandemic levels: Student math and English language scores on the state's Forward exams ticked upward in 2021-22, but were still below where they stood in 2018-19, before the enormous disruption wrought by the pandemic. While precise trends differ by grade level,

for most grades 3 through 8, the share of students scoring proficient or advanced in English language arts had been declining pre-pandemic. They saw a large drop in 2020-21, then rebounded in 2021-22 but remained below 2018-19 levels. There is less of a long-term trend in math proficiency; rates in this subject were largely stable or increasing before their pandemic plunge.

The share of students receiving scores of 3 or higher on Advanced Placement (AP) tests increased in 2021-22, from 61.6% in 2020-21 to 66.1%. Some colleges and universities offer credit to, or waive prerequisites for, students scoring a 3 or higher on an AP exam. Students in every racial and ethnic group showed an increase in 2021-22 in the share who achieved this score. However, Asian and White students were the only racial and ethnic groups whose shares topped pre-pandemic levels.

Test participation improves: The share of students participating in the Forward tests statewide rose in 2021-22 across all racial and ethnic groups. Non-participation rates surged during the pandemic, but this development suggests these data on student performance will be a more reliable indicator moving forward.

Meanwhile, the share of students who did not take the ACT test decreased by 3.4 percentage points to 9.5% in 2021-22. Black students saw the most significant increase in test participation across the state among all groups, with the percentage in this group who did not take the exam falling from 47.6% to 30.9%. Despite the improvement, this was still 3.2 percentage points greater than pre-pandemic levels.

Long-term enrollment decline continues: The statewide enrollment decline in 2022-23 of 6,339 students was Wisconsin's second-largest decrease in 12 years, exceeded only by the drop during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-21. Public school enrollment declined among American Indian, Black, and white students, while the number of Asian, Hispanic, and students of two or more races increased.

This edition of the School DataTool bolsters the Forum's role as the go-to source for interactive data that helps Wisconsinites better understand local and state policy issues.

In July, the [Forum released the latest edition of its Municipal DataTool](#), including data on all 604 cities and villages in the state. In the coming weeks, we will publish the Property Values and Taxes DataTool, which features data for Wisconsin's 72 counties and more than 1,840 cities, villages, and towns.

[Click here to access the updated School DataTool.](#)

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