



# WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

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## **Public School Enrollment Down for 10<sup>th</sup> Straight Year; Chronic Absenteeism Still Elevated** *Updated School DataTool offers interactive data metrics on every Wisconsin public school district*

Statewide public school enrollment in Wisconsin declined for the tenth straight year in 2023-24, with the nearly 9,000-student decline representing the second biggest one-year drop in the last decade.

Wisconsin's statewide rate of student chronic absenteeism declined slightly in 2022-23 but remained highly elevated relative to pre-pandemic levels, with nearly one in five students missing more than 10% of school days.

Meanwhile, student scores on several key tests, including the Forward and ACT exams, increased slightly in 2022-23, the most recent year for which they are available – but still continued to lag their pre-pandemic levels.

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 sixth since its 2019 debut. The most recent available data are used for each metric, going through the 2022-23 school year for some indicators and 2023-24 for others.

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 is a closer look at some of the statewide findings:

**Student enrollment, demographics:** Statewide public school enrollment declined in 2023-24 to about 814,000 students, down from about 823,000 students the year prior. This decrease was primarily driven by declining numbers of white students (-2.1% from 2022-23). Decreases also were recorded for Black and American Indian students.

Enrollment for all other racial and ethnic student groups increased slightly in enrollment this year, including most prominently Hispanic students (up 2.0%) and students identifying as two or more races (up 3.0%).

**Student participation, completion:** The statewide chronic absenteeism rate was 19.5% in 2022-23, a slight decline from the year earlier, when it reached a ten-year high of 22.7%. Still, it was the second-highest rate the state has seen in over ten years.

All racial and ethnic groups experienced a drop in chronic absenteeism. The largest declines were among the student groups that have experienced the highest rates of absenteeism: Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students. The statewide chronic absenteeism rate is the share of students who were absent (excused or unexcused) for more than 10% of school days. In most school districts, this means missing at least 18 days of a school year. Research has tied high rates of chronic absenteeism to lower student achievement, decreased student mental health, higher dropout rates, and more challenges in adulthood.

The statewide graduation rate has hovered around 90% for the past six years; after a slight drop in 2020-21, it has since returned to pre-pandemic levels. Most racial and ethnic groups saw little change in 2022-23 but, notably, the graduation rate for American Indian students dropped by nearly seven percentage points.

**Test scores:** In the 2022-23 school year, the percentage of students scoring proficient or advanced on the Forward exams in Math and English Language Arts (ELA) increased from the previous year across all grade levels (third through eighth), except for fifth grade ELA. In most cases, proficiency still lagged behind pre-pandemic levels, but a few grades – including third grade ELA and fifth grade math – achieved a full recovery.

Comparing ACT scores across years remains challenging given that the average non-testing rate continues to hover around 9%. Some student groups did not test at rates significantly higher than this: for example, 27.0% of Black students in Wisconsin did not take the ACT in 2022-23. In 2022-23, the average composite ACT score in Wisconsin increased by 0.1 points for the second year in a row to 19.3, which remains below pre-pandemic levels.

Advanced Placement (AP) exams provide the opportunity for high school students to earn college credit. The exams are scored on a five-point scale, but students must receive a three or higher to receive college credit or placement. In 2022-23 in Wisconsin, 66.2% of AP tests taken received a score of three or higher, holding steady with 2021-22 and pre-pandemic levels. This percentage is more variable among certain student groups, however. For example, from 2021-22 to 2022-23, it dropped by seven points among students with disabilities, while it declined for the third year in a row among English learners.

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. Earlier this month, the Forum released the latest edition of our Municipal DataTool, including data on all 604 cities and villages in the state. In the coming weeks, we will update our 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 2024 School DataTool.

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