



# WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

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## **Forward Exam Scores Continue to Lag Pre-Pandemic Levels, New Comparison Shows**

*Newly updated DataTool shows student chronic absenteeism remains elevated from prior baseline*

Student assessment scores have not yet recovered from their decline during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a comparison included in the Wisconsin Policy Forum's newly updated [School DataTool](#).

The Forward Exam, the state's primary assessment for students in grades 3 to 8, underwent significant changes for the 2023-24 school year. This initially prevented comparability of the new exam scores to those from prior years, but the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction developed estimates of what previous years' scores would have been under the updated exam and standards.

Our latest DataTool update visualizes these estimates to provide an imperfect, but still useful, basis for comparison with prior years. This comparison shows that, from 2022-23 to 2023-24, few elementary grades saw increases in the percentage of students statewide meeting expectations. Achievement levels also remained low compared to pre-pandemic years, with only fourth-grade English language arts (ELA) exceeding 2018-19 levels. (The Forward Exam was not administered during the 2019-20 school year due to pandemic school closures.)

Experiences among student groups varied. Average ELA scores for Hispanic students dropped in all but one grade from 2022-23 to 2023-24, as was also true for their average math scores. For Black students and students identifying as two or more races, however, average ELA and math scores rose in all but two grade levels.

These are among the key findings of the Wisconsin Policy Forum's updated 2025 School DataTool. This fully interactive online tool can be used to compare 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 experience.

This edition of the tool is the seventh since its 2019 debut. The most recent data are used for each metric, going through the 2023-24 school year for some indicators and 2024-25 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. Other key findings from the tool include:

- The statewide **student chronic absenteeism rate decreased** for the third straight year, falling to 17.7% in 2023-24. But, in an area of significant ongoing concern, these **rates remain far above pre-pandemic norms** for students of all races and ethnicities. The chronic absenteeism rate is the percentage of students who were absent (excused or unexcused) for more than 10% of school days.
- Total statewide **public school enrollment in Wisconsin declined** for the eleventh straight year in 2024-25, decreasing by more than 8,000 students. Although this reduction was less than the nearly 9,000-student drop in 2023-24, it marks the third-largest decline in the last decade.

- Enrollment declined among Black (-0.9%), white (-2.1%), and American Indian (-3.1%) students, while the number of students identifying as Asian (+0.5%), Hispanic (+2.5%), and of two or more races (+3.1%) increased. The steady growth in enrollment among these latter groups over the past 15 years reflects the **growing racial and ethnic diversity** of the state's student population.
- In one positive development, the share of **students achieving scores of 3 or higher on Advanced Placement (AP) tests rose** by five percentage points in 2023-24 to 71.2%, the highest rate since at least 2008-09. Even more encouragingly, nearly all student groups improved their scores. AP exams provide the opportunity for high school students to earn college credit. The exams are scored on a five-point scale, with some colleges offering credit or placement for scores of 3 or higher.
- Student **rates of non-testing, or declining to take, the mandated statewide ACT test remain elevated** from pre-pandemic levels. While they have decreased from their 2020-21 peak of 12.9%, test participation rates improved only marginally in the last year, with 8.5% of students still not testing in 2023-24, compared to 5.2% in 2018-19 before COVID-19 hit. These high non-participation rates raise concerns not only about student disengagement but also about the validity of the data.
- The **statewide ACT composite score remained below pre-pandemic levels** in 2023-24, averaging 19.2 out of a possible 36. Since 2020-21, high school students' scores have stagnated and fallen short of 2019-20's average composite score of 19.8.
- In 2023-24, **statewide graduation rates increased** by 0.6 percentage points, reaching 91.1%. This is the highest graduation rate observed in the past 12 years and continues an incremental four-year upward trend.
- Nearly all racial and ethnic groups increased their graduation rates. **American Indian students made the largest increase** in 2023-24 from the previous year (11.6 percentage points) and the second-largest rise over the past 12 years (9.8 points). The most growth in the last 12 years belongs to Hispanic students, who improved their rates by 10.8 percentage points from 2011-12 to 2023-24.

[Click here](#) to access the 2025 School DataTool.

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