

# Dept. of Public Instruction: Wisconsin Student Assessment System results released

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MADISON — The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction today released results of the Wisconsin Student Assessment System (WSAS) exams given to students during the 2020-21 school year. Assessments were administered to students in spring 2021 following standard in-person test taking procedures amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

“During a school year of unprecedented challenges, and in the middle of a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic, our educators and students persevered,” State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly said. “Participation and proficiency rates look different than other years, and that is not surprising considering the extraordinary circumstances and challenges faced everywhere in our state, including schools and districts. Make no mistake, students learned many lessons this year – in resilience, time management, technology, and problem solving – that may not be reflected in a standardized assessment, and we continue to have work to do to ensure our students are growing, learning, and feel safe and supported at school.”

The WSAS consists of the Forward Exam given in grades three through eight and 10, the ACT Aspire given in grades nine and 10, the ACT with writing in grade 11, and Dynamic Learning Maps given across all tested grades to students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. Results from the WSAS are a foundational component of the state-legislated school and district report cards that will be issued in November.

Overall, statewide participation rates among the approximately 580,000 enrolled public and Choice school students on the Forward, DLM, Aspire, and ACT decreased

from previous years to 84 percent in English language arts and 85 percent in mathematics. The decline is likely due to pandemic-related factors such as a change in learning environment, parent/guardian opt-out from the assessments, and changes in enrollment from previous years. Consistent with national trends, proficiency rates in ELA (32 percent) and mathematics (31 percent) decreased statewide among enrolled public and Choice school students. Proficiency rates are calculated as a percent of enrolled students, not tested students. Students who were not tested count against overall proficiency scores. DPI requested a waiver for the requirement of statewide academic testing for all students from the United States Department of Education; a waiver was not received. While the DPI worked with districts to provide additional flexibility to safely administer assessments, students did not participate in the assessments in some instances due to local health conditions and concerns, or to parent choices to keep students home. In some districts, lower than usual participation rates may mean that students who took the test are not representative of the overall student population. It is strongly recommended to use caution when interpreting results. Making comparisons across years or districts when test participation rates are lower than 95 percent should be avoided, as varying factors resulted in an overall decline in participation rates across the state.

The DPI is committed to supporting students' academic curiosity, growth, and determination as Wisconsin continues to move through the COVID-19 pandemic. Teams across the department continue to collaborate with Wisconsin educators on improving academic outcomes through instructional practices that advance equity in math and ELA, revisions of standards in math and ELA and accompanying professional learning, professional learning about reading foundational skills, and utilizing federal funds to accelerate student learning using evidence-based instructional practices. Further, the department recognizes that academic outcomes are linked to student mental health and safety. To that end, the DPI continues to provide consultation, training, tools, and grant support to help schools and districts build and continuously improve trauma sensitive comprehensive school mental health systems. These systems provide a continuum of supports, such as social and emotional learning, bullying prevention, and youth suicide prevention. Many schools take advantage of the school-based mental health services grant program to enhance their ability to fund and sustain these programs and system improvements. By supporting student academic success as well as student health and safety in Wisconsin's schools, Wisconsin's students can grow into the leaders of tomorrow.

Information on public school performance is made available by school and by district on the WISEdash Public Portal, <http://wisedash.dpi.wi.gov>. Data of student performance in Wisconsin's three parental choice programs (Milwaukee, Racine, and Wisconsin) is posted via the Parental Choice Program data page at <https://dpi.wi.gov/assessment/parental-choice-program/data>.

### About the tests

Assessment and accountability requirements for the 2019-20 school year were waived by the U.S. Department of Education and the Wisconsin State Legislature due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Forward Exam began during the 2015-16 school year to gauge Wisconsin student performance in relation to Wisconsin State Standards. These standards outline skills for students to learn in order to be college and career ready. Students in grades three through eight take tests in ELA and mathematics. Students in grades four and eight take the Forward science assessment. Students in grades four, eight, and 10 also take a social studies exam. The 2021 Forward Exam and DLM were administered to students between March 22 and May 14, 2021.

The 2020-21 school year was the seventh year of ACT with writing and DLM testing of students in grade 11, and the second year that the ninth and 10th grade online ACT Aspire assessments have been included in the statewide accountability system. The ACT tests include reading, math, English, science, and writing. The ACT Aspire fulfills a state legal requirement, while the 11th grade ACT and DLM assessments fulfill requirements in both state and federal law. The ACT, a nationwide college admissions test that measures student readiness for college and careers, is administered via paper and pencil or online.