

RESEARCH BRIEFS

Brief #5

Fall 2011

Evidence of Wisconsin School Success

Overview

A number of organizations today want to privatize public education, which means replacing public schools with schools that are run by for-profit or non-profit corporations. In order to create the need for change, these groups must first work to discredit public education. Public schools, it turns out, often are more successful than the public is led to believe. Below are some important points to remember about Wisconsin's public schools. Many indicators suggest that Wisconsin has one of the best systems of public education in the nation.

Graduation rates—we're #1

Few people realize that the nation today graduates more students than it did in the past. In the 1920s, for example, a mere 20 percent of the population had a high school degree. And that number was up to only 50 percent by 1960. Today, Wisconsin leads the nation, graduating 89 percent of its students, well above the national average of 74 percent. Recently, changes were made in the way graduation rates are determined. A new study by the National Center for Education Statistics, which looked at the average freshman graduation rate, found that *Wisconsin ranked first nationally* on graduation rates the last two years.

College entrance exams

Wisconsin also does well on college entrance exams. Nationally, about 45 percent of students take the ACT, but in Wisconsin almost 70 percent of students took the test in 2010. Wisconsin scored first or second nationally the last 20 years. It ranked third in 2010 with a composite score of 22.2, just below Iowa and Minnesota.

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On the SAT, which is taken by a smaller number of students, Wisconsin pupils scored 595 in reading and 604 in math in 2010, well above the national average of 501 (reading) and 516 (math). The state also scored well above the national average in writing, earning a score of 579 compared to the national average of 492.

Advanced Placement

Recent results on the Advanced Placement Tests show that Wisconsin scored above the national average, with 70 percent of 2010 graduates passing the exam, making them eligible for college credit. Wisconsin is first among all states in the Midwest on the percent of 2010 graduates passing the AP exam. A higher percentage of students took the AP exam in Wisconsin than any other state in the Midwest, and more children today are enrolled in AP classes in Wisconsin than at any time in state history.

Post-secondary education

Three-quarters of Wisconsin children go on to some form of post-secondary education, including two-year and technical colleges.

Highly qualified teachers

Wisconsin has one of the highest rates of “in-field” teaching in the nation, meaning that more teachers here have a degree in the subject they are teaching than all but two states. Ninety-eight percent of teachers are highly qualified; 52 percent of teachers hold a master’s degree (compared to 9 percent of the state’s general population); and only 2.5 percent of Wisconsin teachers hold emergency or provisional licenses.

Safest schools in the nation

Wisconsin has the second-lowest reported incidents of gun threats or violence, or number of high school students carrying weapons to school.¹

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National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Scores

NAEP scores are based on random samples of about 2,000 students tested from each state (see *Research Brief #4*). Reported below are the scale scores for Wisconsin students in reading and math. Reading scores held stable while scores for mathematics increased since state level testing began in the 1990s. These scores include non-college bound and college bound students alike.

Average Scale Scores of Wisconsin’s Fourth and Eighth Graders Reading 1998 – 2009

	1998	2003	2005	2007	2009
4th Grade	222	221	221	223	220
8th Grade	266	265	266	264	266

National Center for Education Statistics

Average Scale Scores of Wisconsin’s Fourth and Eighth Graders Mathematics 1992 – 2009

	1992	1996	2003	2005	2007	2009
4th Grade	229	231	237	241	244	244
8th Grade	278	283	284	286	286	288

National Center for Education Statistics²

Student demographics

The overall number of students in Wisconsin increased about 12 percent between 1990 and 2009, but the percentage of low-income students increased a significant 145 percent. More students qualify for free and reduced lunch programs today than any time during the program’s history. Since 1990, there also has been a 50 percent increase in the population of special needs students, and the number of English Language Learners increased 337 percent.

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Changes in Wisconsin's Student Demographics

Students	1989-90	2009-10	Percent Increase
Low income	134,765	330,620	145.3%
Special needs	83,178	125,503	50.9%
English language learners	10,447	45,651	336.9%
Total student population	782,905	873,586	11.6%

Source: Department Public Instruction

Conclusion

On many measures, Wisconsin has one of the finest systems of public education in the nation. While the achievement gap continues to be a significant problem, students overall perform at high levels on national assessments, especially for college bound students. These gains come despite the fact that Wisconsin's student population has changed dramatically, with schools serving many more low-income and special needs students than ever before.

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Endnotes

¹ Center for Disease Control, "Youth Risk Behavior," 2009.

² National Center for Education Statistics, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states>