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Chairman Thiesfeldt and members of the Committee on Education,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify about the important topic of report cards. I am Will Flanders, the Research Director for the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty (WILL). Wisconsin's report card system has been far from perfect and over the past several years, we have regularly discussed some of the major issues.¹ However, the latest iteration made these problems far worse.

The goal of the state's report card should be to provide families with information about the quality of local schools so families can make informed decisions. But the report cards released by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) this year make it impossible for parents to compare schools to their neighbors, or even track the progress of an individual school over several years. I will address three major issues with this year's report cards: changes to the measure of absenteeism, changes to the threshold scores for report card ratings, and a longer-standing issue with the way in which growth is included in report cards.

Absenteeism

This year, DPI removed a five-point deduction from a district's overall score that previously applied to school districts which had a chronic absenteeism rate of greater than 13%. Instead, DPI incorporated chronic absenteeism into the On-Track and Target Group Outcomes priority areas.

One of the many unintended consequences of continual school shutdowns has been that a substantial number of students have effectively disappeared from the system. Between 2019 and 2021, enrollment in Wisconsin's public schools decreased by more than 25,000 students.² Movement to other forms of education can't completely explain this. Enrollment in the state's choice and charter programs went up by less than 5,000, and enrollment in home-based education went up by approximately 10,000 students according to DPI's data,³ leaving about 10,000 students unaccounted for. One national study⁴ suggested that these "lost kids" are likely some of the kids most at-risk for challenges in life, such as those from low-income households,

¹ <https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/final-report-card-policy-brief-9.21.20.pdf>

² <https://wisedash.dpi.wi.gov/Dashboard/dashboard/20060>

³ <https://dpi.wi.gov/parental-education-options/home-based/statistics>

⁴ <https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/missing-margins-estimating-scale-covid-19-attendance-crisis#Introduction>



with disabilities, or in foster care. We recognize that schools don’t have complete control of whether a child shows up on a daily basis, but we do know that a move to virtual education has pushed some kids out of the system entirely.

We also know from my research⁵ on Wisconsin and other research at the national level⁶ that rates of COVID-19 in a particular area played little to no role in reopening decisions over the past two school years. Instead, it was the strength of the teachers’ union in a community that effected those decisions. We are seeing this again now with decisions in heavily unionized districts like Milwaukee and Madison, that are choosing to shut down the district completely, rather than provide in-person instruction on a school-by-school basis if staff shortages arise. Schools need to be accountable for these decisions. A deduction on the report card, readily viewable by families for high absenteeism rates, helped to serve that purpose. But DPI has taken that away without explanation or input.

Threshold of Categories

Changes to the thresholds for report card ratings were even more curious. DPI lowered the cutoff report card score for Exceeds Expectations, Meets Expectations and Meets Few Expectations. The total lack of a justification from DPI for this change, coupled with the fact that the change got an important district just over the threshold to “Meeting Expectations⁷” makes it difficult not to see this change as politically motivated. In the handout, the table shows the changes in cut points and how many districts had their status changed because of it.

Table 1. Cut point Change and Districts Effected

Category	Old Cut Point (New)	Districts That Would Fall a Category
Significantly Exceeds Expectations	100.0-83.0 (100.0-83.0)	--
Exceeds Expectations	82.9-73.0 (82.9-70.0)	71 Districts
Meets Expectations	72.9-63.0 (69.9-58.0)	40 Districts
Meets Few Expectations	62.9-53.0 (57.9-48.0)	3 Districts
Fails to Meet Expectations	<53.0 (<48.0)	--

Under the old cut points, 71 districts that are ranked as “*Exceeds Expectations*” would have been ranked as “*Meets Expectations*.” Perhaps more problematic is the fact that forty districts “Met Expectations” with scores that fell between 63 and 58. In other words, without the change in cut points, forty additional districts would have received two stars, *Meeting Few Expectations*, informing parents and policy makers that they ought to be concerned about the quality of education in that district. The very last district to squeak under this new cut point was

⁵ <https://will-law.org/study-unions-politics-appear-to-drive-fall-school-reopening-decisions-in-wisconsin/>

⁶ https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3684867

⁷ https://apps2.dpi.wi.gov/reportcards/get-file?level=district&distKey=004387&fileName=DRCDetail_Public_Milwaukee_2020-21_004387.pdf



Milwaukee Public Schools—a district where only 7.3% of students reached proficiency⁸ in English/Language Arts this year. We cannot continue to have a report card that creates this “Lake Wobegon Effect” where everyone is above average because we know that it is simply not true.

Like other changes with the report card this year, DPI has not explained the reason for these changes. Perhaps DPI would say that the change to the manner in which absenteeism was calculated required this change to the thresholds. We would argue that this is all the more reason not to have started making unilateral changes in the first place.

The changes to absenteeism and threshold categories have made the report card incomparable to previous years and therefore, essentially useless.

Student Growth

Not all of the problems with the report card are based on changes that occurred this year. For example, schools like Kluge Elementary in Milwaukee have been able to Meet Expectations⁹ in past years with proficiency rates as low as 4.1%. For districts like Milwaukee with large numbers of low-income students, student growth makes up 45% of their overall score while proficiency makes up only 5%. In other districts with few low-income kids, these percentages are reversed where growth will matter very little.

Including growth as a component of the report card score is vital. Many students enter school behind where they should be, and schools ought to be rewarded for helping students “catch up.” But when proficiency is rendered almost meaningless, our report cards help promote what George W. Bush called the “soft bigotry of low expectations.”¹⁰ We’re effectively telling schools with large numbers of low-income students that we not only don’t expect them to help kids reach proficiency today, we *never* expect them to.

We ought not give schools a pass on proficiency simply because they’re working with a more challenging population of students. In a state with the largest racial achievement gap in the country according to NAEP scores, we have to do better. We don’t have all the answers on how growth should be measured and weighted yet. But what we should do in addressing this is have an open and transparent discussion where all the relevant stakeholders have a chance to participate—something that was not done by DPI in this process.

Other Considerations for changes to the report card

While WILL does not believe that this should be a part of the overall report card score, we believe some measure of student safety ought to be included on the report card. Particularly in Wisconsin’s urban areas, the safety of a child in school is likely to be a parent’s preeminent concern, even before things like academic achievement. By incorporating a measure of safety on

⁸ <https://wisedash.dpi.wi.gov/Dashboard/dashboard/19948>

⁹ https://apps2.dpi.wi.gov/reportcards/get-file?level=district&distKey=004387&fileName=DRCDetail_Public_Milwaukee_2018-19_4387.PDF

¹⁰ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/elections/bushtext071000.htm>



the report card, it can become an even more useful resource for parents of students in schools that struggle with violence, bullying, or drugs.

It is important to note that suspension and expulsion rates would likely not be the best metric to use here. Suspension and expulsion rates have fallen extensively in Wisconsin with little evidence that student behavior has improved. What is needed is student-level perspective on violence. One possibility for that is the public disclosure of some results from the CDC's Youth Behavior Risk Survey.¹¹ Already implemented in some Wisconsin schools, this survey includes questions on whether a student feels safe on school property, or has been in a fight in the past twelve months. This data could prove far more illuminating than suspension and expulsion numbers that schools are conscious of and may sometimes try to minimize artificially.

Other states like Texas and Georgia have gotten even more creative, by including in the report cards things such as expenditure per student and the ratio of instructional spending to overall spending in the district.¹² Others have included metrics on the extent to which students are successful in achieving career and technical certifications.¹³ All of these additions warrant consideration.

We are in the era of parental empowerment. Across Wisconsin and the nation, parents are increasingly asking questions about what is being taught in their schools, what factors are going into school closure and masking decisions, and whether or not their child would be better served by going somewhere else. By changing the report cards on a whim, DPI has impeded this process, and put yet another roadblock in the path of parents to understanding what is going on with schools in their community. We urge the legislature to take a hard look at these changes, and work to make the report card less of a propaganda report trumpeting the greatness of Wisconsin schools, and more of a tool for accountability.

Thank you for your time.

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¹¹ <https://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/yrbs>

¹² <https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/accountability/academic-accountability/performance-reporting/school-report-cards>

¹³ <https://www.nsba.org/News/2019/State-Report-Cards>