Education



Three policy avenues to help public schools flourish

By Daniel Buck

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2027

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For the last decade, academic scores in Wisconsin have been in steady decline. Seeing as our state's civic, economic and cultural health depends on a well-educated population and the majority of students attend public schools, it is imperative that policymakers reverse this trend. This report recommends three broad avenues for lawmakers to consider, along with several concrete actions within each.

Key recommendations

- Raising expectations is arguably the avenue upon which all else depends. Policymakers can do so by strengthening math instruction, including universal screening tests, revising state standards, actively combatting grade inflation, and raising academic cut scores.
- Teachers are central to education occurring within schools: Without a strong teaching workforce, curriculum remains untaught and policies go unimplemented. Creating and supporting a strong teacher corps requires strong behavior codes, competitive merit-based pay, and rigorous practical training.
- At the end of a quality education, a student ought to be prepared for a professional career. To strengthen career pipelines, policymakers can implement credential transparency, bolster career and technical education, and expand gifted and talented education across the state.

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Introduction

Since a peak in 2013, academic scores across the nation have been in steady decline.[1] No outlier, over the previous decade Wisconsin students dropped the equivalent of almost an entire grade level on the reading portion of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), commonly called the "Nation's Report Card."[2]

This is a disastrous trend. Schools train the next generation of skilled craftsmen, institutional and community leaders, entrepreneurs, doctors, and scientists on which our economy depends. They form the educated populace necessary for a thriving democracy. Each and every student requires basic academic skills to thrive into adulthood. To continue a downward trend is to fail our students and create a dimmer future for upcoming generations.

The promotion and expansion of educational freedom — outlined in another chapter of the Mandate — is a crucial reform. Education choice from vouchers to tax credits and charter schools is central to providing high-quality learning opportunities to the students who attend them. More generally, a large body of research has demonstrated the positive pressure of so-called "competitive effects."[3] That is, public charter schools, private schools and other options apply competitive pressure to district schools and incentivize their improvement. In a recent research paper, Patrick Graff writes that the expenditures of Florida's choice programs "improved public school student achievement" far more than "had the same amount of new funding instead been spent directly through the public school system."[4]

For all the good of school choice, however, the majority of students still attend traditional public schools. Even in Arizona, the state with the most robust system of education freedom, 89 percent of students attend a public school.[5] Most simply, we must improve public education because that's where the students are.

In the following chapter, I outline three broad avenues for public school reform along with concrete policies to achieve these ends. These recommendations are not exhaustive. Likewise, there are other things that would be beneficial for public schools that need not be subject to mandates from Madison. School leaders could adopt any of the recommendations. That said, the brief below provides a general framework to think through educational reform alongside a few of the most high-impact action items.

Restore expectations

During his presidential campaign, George W. Bush provided one of the most

enduring criticisms of American education when he condemned "the soft bigotry of low expectations."[6] He was lamenting the way that low expectations under the guise of compassion held students back in urban schools. In the Dairy State, his phrase could apply to all schools.

In 2023, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction began to lower the cut scores at which students receive a label of "proficient" on the Wisconsin Forward exam.[7] More students technically "met" expectations, but those expectations were lower. Lower cut scores create a mirage of improvement when, in reality, they do little to boost academic performance.[8] Students will rise up or drop down to the standard to which you hold them. Set the bar high, demand excellence, and provide support, and students will succeed. Lower the standard, for whatever reason, and students will act accordingly. For example, Tennessee assembly member Mark White described in The Washington Post how his state "raised Tennessee's K-12 standards, aligned classroom practices to those standards and overhauled our state tests to make them more rigorous."[9] In the following years, the Volunteer State became the fastest growing state on the NAEP test, jumping, for example, from 46th to 23rd in 4th grade math scores.[10]

High standards enhance curriculum, improve assessments, guide teacher preparation, and create statewide coherence. Conversely, low standards leave districts crafting everything from scratch and create a permission structure for weak curricula and incoherent instructional practices. Raising expectations, then, is the most important reform to pursue and the avenue upon which all else depends.

Raise cut scores

Any administration, Republican or Democrat, should immediately reverse the lower test scores that were enacted in recent years. Instead, Wisconsin should align the outcomes of the Wisconsin Forward exam with those of NAEP, an exam with a high bar for proficiency.

Doing so accomplishes two things. First, it would facilitate a better, easier and more honest portrayal of how Wisconsin students are doing. Especially in an era of rampant grade inflation, it would close the "honesty gap" between parents' perceptions of their children's performances and how students actually perform. Consider that a national poll conducted in 2016 showed 90 percent of parents believe their children perform at grade level when, in reality, only about a third of students do so.[11] Moreover, an honest portrayal would facilitate more accurate state-to-state comparisons by which policy makers and researchers could identify and replicate successful, effective laws.

Second, it would incentivize better educational outcomes. Students, teachers, administrators and parents alike all have an interest in getting every child to the bar of proficiency. The higher lawmakers set it, the higher each child can aim and ultimately reach.

Revise state standards

In a comprehensive review of our civic and social studies standards in 2021, the Fordham Institute rated Wisconsin as

"inadequate," with a failing grade in both history and civics. According to the report, the state's standards are overly vague and "provide almost no content guidance."[12]

Virginia and Florida recently overhauled their state-level social studies standards, delineating the concrete ideas, events and documents with which any high school graduate ought to be familiar.[13] At the American Enterprise Institute, emeritus professor Mark Bauerlein outlines what a similar overhaul could look like for state English standards, while the National Association of Scholars has written model K-12 standards for science, math and language arts.[14]

Wisconsin should audit its standards in every content area and revise them to be the model for the nation.

Replicate the 2023 literacy bill for math

In 2023, the Wisconsin Legislature passed a literacy act which promoted the science of reading across K-12 schools. Our state was following a countrywide trend, correcting a generations-long error wherein students learned to read (or didn't) through pseudoscientific approaches to literacy such as "whole language" — where students are encouraged to guess at words and left to figure out how to read on their own — instead of the more effective phonics-based instruction, where students are explicitly taught letter-sound correspondence, encouraged to sound out words, and given many opportunities to practice.[15] A similar fight is playing out in mathematics.

In 2025, the Legislature considered a math bill modeled on the 2023 literacy bill, which would have required universal math screener tests, tutoring for struggling pupils, and individual math plans to get students back to grade level, but the Legislature ultimately failed to advance it.[16] The next Legislature should renew this effort and add to the original bill both an incentive for schools to use high-quality math curricula and a requirement that teacher preparation programs offer and new educators undergo training in the science of math — where students are explicitly taught algorithms, encouraged to practice, and required to memorize their math facts such as multiplication tables.

Fight grade inflation

As with grocery store prices, grades are slowly but surely inflating, and it's clear that it's a problem.[17] Recent research finds that steady grade inflation "reduces a student's future test scores, the likelihood of graduating from high school, college enrollment, and ultimately earnings."[18]

How to tackle inflation is less clear. There's a collective action problem. If only a few teachers flip a switch and implement more rigorous grading, their students could struggle to win college enrollment or their schools could face undue public criticism.

Several proposals could correct the issue collectively. Novel approaches to grading such as equity grading, where students receive no zeroes even if they turn in no work or get no late work penalties, and standards-based grading, where teachers focus on holistic reviews instead of more

objective right-or-wrong reviews, all but guarantee inflated grades. Less invasive than a prohibition on these practices, schools could publish their average GPA alongside their students' final GPAs so that those students are not penalized in the college-enrollment process for their school and teachers making the difficult but correct decision to adopt more stringent grading standards.

Encourage character education

While their primary focus is academics, schools are inherently character-forming institutions. What behavior they allow or punish, whom they cast as history's heroes and villains, what messages they hang on the walls — each of these influences the habits, values and therefore the character of students within them. It's not a question of if schools form character but whether they do so intentionally and well.

The Badger Institute examined the effects of character education on teacher retention.[19] The data were inconclusive, but school leaders said they saw character education as a means to meaningfully improve school culture and thereby retain teachers. Wisconsin should once again make character central to its educational vision. Most of character formation in schools comes through learning itself: learning habits of responsibility and determination through study and developing a robust understanding of virtue through history and literature. But policymakers can encourage the adoption of character education. For example, they could replace or significantly update the current "social emotional learning" competencies to instead focus on character and virtue.[20]

Strengthen teacher professionalism

Teachers are the essential component to any successful school system. No high standards, rigorous curriculum or wise policies will mean much if teachers are unprepared to implement and enforce them. Thus, state policymaking must consider the support and training of the teaching workforce.

Improve teacher prep and licensure

It is an open secret that teacher preparation programs are woefully inadequate. Educators speak of early years in the profession as they might a hazing ritual. Without adequate training in classroom management or lesson plan preparation, can newbies make it through a year of chaos and unrelenting workloads? Beyond mere anecdote, research finds that attending a preparation program makes little to no difference to a teacher's long-term effectiveness.[21] Educators deserve better.

There are two approaches to improve teacher preparation, both of which can and should be pursued simultaneously.

First, it is important to improve upon existing teacher preparation programs at Wisconsin universities. A concerning report from the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty found that, in their college preparation courses, teachers are being assigned articles such as "Playing with Gender" and children's books such as "Antiracist Baby," instead of practical

manuals.[22] In 2024, Florida passed a law that prohibited the instruction of prospective teachers in theories of privilege and oppression so they might instead focus on the nuts and bolts of classroom instruction and management.[23] Where professors of education may enjoy dialogues about abstruse principles, teachers need to know how to write a quiz and run a classroom. State policy should ensure that they receive such training.

Second, it would be prudent to ease the burden of licensure and credentialing. The Badger Institute has proposed several ideas, such as repealing and replacing the set of rules known as PI 34, which creates onerous and needless hurdles for prospective teachers. Also proposed: allowing teachers who have been certified in other states to be granted licensure in Wisconsin with minimum hassle, allowing districts and charters to develop their own training and licensure programs, and allowing principals to make their own hiring decisions, during which formal credentials can and should be considered but not necessarily required.[24]

Pass a teacher bill of rights

Alongside academic expectations, schools also have behavioral standards. What behaviors are encouraged, what is sanctioned, and what is permitted are necessary questions to ask when cultivating a healthy learning atmosphere. There's a powerful case to be made that classroom management is the primary factor for any school's success — without a well-ordered school environment, no other reforms can have much effect. A phonics lesson will fail if little Johnny cannot even hear his teacher.

Teachers and students need help. A disheartening report from the Badger Institute provides a look into the kinds of behaviors that are regularly occurring within schools:

- A student tipping bookcases and assaulting a teacher.
- Students throwing chairs.
- A teacher asking for a student's phone (they're banned) and being told "f--- your mother" in response.
- A teacher needing 66 stitches and foot surgery from breaking up a fight.[25]

Representative national surveys regularly find that behavior ranks above pay as the primary major stressor and concern among teachers.[26]

In 2025, the Wisconsin Senate and Assembly considered a teacher bill of rights that would have clarified when teachers could remove students from their classrooms, required re-entry procedures for misbehaving students, and protected teachers from retaliation when they acted in good faith to maintain classroom order.[27]

What to do with suspended or expelled students is a difficult problem to solve. When Houston's school district cracked down on bad behavior, it had to expand its capacity for housing students on in-school suspensions, for example.[28] And, realistically, stronger behavior codes will come with more students excluded from schools — but sparing misbehaving students from the consequences of their actions doesn't remove consequences, it makes well-behaved students suffer the

consequences of a disrupted education.

Despite the legislation's bipartisan support, Gov. Tony Evers vetoed the teacher bill of rights. The next Legislature and administration should renew and pass this bill.

Promote competitive merit-based pay

Teachers unions and various commentators often assert that teachers are "underpaid." The data do not support this view. Analysts at the American Enterprise Institute crunched the numbers nationally and found a 9 percent pay premium compared to other careers that require similar education and skills.[29]

Proposed policies for compensation reform often include blanket increases. For example, U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders recommended a floor of $60,000 per year, and then-U.S. Sen. Kamala Harris recommended $315 billion in additional spending for an increase of $13,500 per teacher per year.[30] But blanket pay raises are costly for a questionable return on educational investment.[31] The incentives do not change, as blanket raises do not reward excellence and provide no pathway for career advancement or salary growth. They are not a reliably demonstrated achievement intervention and appear less productive than strategically allocating compensation or staffing dollars.

Instead, merit pay is a means to both increase the compensation of the best teachers and incentivize their colleagues to likewise perform at a high level. A recent meta-analysis reviewed 37 studies into merit pay and found that the effects of this payment structure "are positive and statistically significant."[32] The most successful policies included substantial pay bumps, had multiple measures of a teacher's effectiveness, and focused on the elementary level. And merit pay can include, as a recent Badger Institute proposal noted, both "paying more to effective teachers" as well as "those with hard-to-replace certifications."[33]

Wisconsin already allows merit pay, but a recent study found that the majority of districts that adopted merit pay systems subsequently abandoned them due to difficulties in implementation.[34] Texas and Florida both have more robust merit-pay laws than Wisconsin: Florida outright requires districts to implement merit-pay systems and Texas provides fiscal incentives for districts to voluntarily build such systems.[35, 36] That said, to preserve both local autonomy and fiscal responsibility, Wisconsin could limit itself to competitive grants for districts to experiment with merit-pay systems and thereby help with implementation problems that schools have faced.

Improve career pathways

For about two decades, "college for all" was the mantra of education reform. A bachelor's degree was seemingly a ticket to career success, so the assumed wisdom recommended that schools optimize their operations, curricula and policies to send as many students off to four-year institutions as possible. But considering rising tuition, that only 64 percent of students graduate from college within six years (let alone four years), that fewer than half of Americans have a bachelor's

degree, and the ideological capture of universities, there's good reason to question the return on investment of college attendance.[37]

As a result, schools have begun and should continue their efforts to restore and maintain other pathways into careers.

Implement credential transparency

Industry recognized credentials (IRCs) are qualifications, licenses and certifications that students can receive while they're still in school. They are akin to apprenticeships or early career training in that they facilitate an easier transition into the workforce and signal a potential hire's quality to an employer. Speaking imperfectly, they're like advanced placement classes or dual enrollment credits for the trades.

While a worthwhile endeavor, not all IRCs are created equal. For example, the education news site Chalkbeat reported on dubious credentials in Pennsylvania such as "ladder safety."[38] To incentivize better and more useful credentials, both Texas and Indiana are publishing data that they collect about credentials, competencies, program quality and student outcomes.[39]

Any student or family can spend their money on whatever credential they want, but such databases allow them to make wiser, more informed decisions. Moreover, a state can use such information to direct its agencies to use public money only in programs that fill a clear industry need.

Bolster career and technical education

Researchers at the Fordham Institute identify five (of many) benefits of career and technical education: CTE courses improve graduation rates because the majority of "high school dropouts say they would have stayed in school if they had received relevant, real-world learning opportunities"; taking CTE courses improves postsecondary outcomes such as college attendance and completion; CTE course concentrations improve salaries for students after graduation in both the long and short term; beyond utilitarian work skills, CTE courses also improve soft skills such as perseverance, grit, self-efficacy, work ethic, and conscientiousness; and CTE courses are disproportionately beneficial for low-income students.[40]

High schools are a logical mechanism through which students can receive training in necessary job-related skills. A few discrete policies can improve upon our current system. To its credit, Wisconsin already allows alternative licensure for industry experts who offer career and technical education courses and instruction, but the process can be streamlined by reducing the number of years it takes to move from an initial to provisional license, for example.[41] In recent years, Indiana reformed its high school diploma system by implementing different tracks or "seals" for enrollment, employment or enlistment.[42] A similar alternative diploma would replace, for example, one credit in English and one in physical education with two in career and technical education. Finally, the proposed Senate Bill 591 last year recommended

a board to oversee Wisconsin's system of dual enrollment classes offering both high school and college credits.[43] A similar board for career and technical education could help to manage and facilitate credentials, school and industry partnerships, and other logistics of the program.

Expand gifted education

Any classroom has students with abilities ranging from several grades behind to several grades ahead of expectations.[44] Each of these students deserves a challenging education. Unfortunately, American schools offer meager gifted and talented programming. A 2019 survey found that three-quarters of schools that offer any kind of gifted and talented programming offer only supplemental activities, such as projects or games for gifted students, rather than accelerated curriculum, grade advancement, or separate classes.[45]

Wisconsin needs to foster the human capital that will generate innovation and cutting-edge research. A Fordham Institute report examining the efficacy of different interventions found "substantial evidence" that more robust programming such as acceleration or separate curricula "have significant positive effects."[46] Currently, Wisconsin statute requires that districts identify students for gifted and talented programs and that they designate someone to run the program.[47] Beyond these meager provisions there is little state guidance about what types of programming schools ought to provide or what kind of transparency systems and accountability structures ought to exist. At the very least, lawmakers could require that districts publish their existing advanced educational services — including a distinction between enrichment opportunities and more robust advanced coursework and acceleration — as well as establishing clear acceleration criteria and processes.

Conclusion

The leading light of the 19th century common schools movement, Horace Mann, wrote, "The training of the schoolroom expands into the institutions and fortunes of the State." In other words, as the schools go, so goes our society. If the next generation is well trained, well educated, and brought up in rigorous instruction, then the future of our state is secured. If, however, children receive poor instruction, attend chaotic schools, and learn through weak, incoherent curricula, then industry and civil society will struggle accordingly.

Too often, the proposals for reforming education involve just more of the same: more blank checks, more regulations, more days in school. This policy agenda is by no means comprehensive but it attempts to improve upon and reform the system itself — to correct flawed incentives, add coherence to the system's end goals, and raise academic expectations. We need to reform the system, not simply inject more money into that which doesn't work.

About the author



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