

State of Milwaukee Education: Student Proficiency & School Report Cards

Key findings

• STATE ASSESSMENTS (STUDENT DATA)

- ▶ Across all three school sectors, fewer than 1 in 5 students are proficient in both English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics.
- ▶ Proficiency rates are lower in high schools than in elementary schools, but elementary students saw greater proficiency declines post-pandemic than high school students.

• NATION'S REPORT CARD (NATIONAL DATA)

- ▶ Milwaukee's student proficiency in math and reading is amongst the worst in the nation.
- ▶ Disparities in proficiency by race have continued to widen over the past several years.

• STATE REPORT CARD (SCHOOL DATA)

- ▶ Nearly two-thirds of Milwaukee schools were rated as meeting or exceeding the state's expectations in 2022 (three, four, or five-star ratings).
- ▶ Black students, Hispanic students, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students have limited access to high-quality schools compared to their peers.

Purpose

Every Wisconsin resident has a stake in the success of Milwaukee's children and youth. To ensure that success, all stakeholders need ready access to key information about the city's K3-12 schools, including school and student performance, in order to make informed decisions about its future.

This report provides an overview of student and school performance in Milwaukee and provides key facts and

figures compiled from the latest information available from official sources. It includes a detailed summary of the most recent student performance results at local and national levels, as well as an analysis of school performance via their state report cards. It is our hope that this publication clearly lays out this information in an accessible way for all interested stakeholders.

Student Proficiency on Wisconsin State Assessments

Wisconsin assessments were designed to approximate national benchmarks and measure student progress according to state standards of student proficiency. These annual assessments (the Forward exam for K-8 and ACT/ACT Aspire for 9-12) give us an accurate picture of how students are performing in real time.

In Milwaukee, student proficiency in math and reading has declined since 2016, and Milwaukee students

continue to underperform in these subjects compared to both their state and national peers. Overall, fewer than one in five Milwaukee students are meeting state-established proficiency standards in English Language Arts (ELA) and Math, and Milwaukee has remained at or near the bottom of national measures of student academic outcomes for more than a decade. These trends were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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This is the first year since 2018–2019 that Milwaukee has had more complete student proficiency data. Test data for 2019–20 is missing because tests were canceled in 2020 due to the onset of the pandemic, while 2020–21 test data is incomplete due to historically low and variable participation rates (less than 50% in many schools). To account for these factors, we draw comparisons between this year and pre-pandemic assessment results. With few exceptions, almost all Milwaukee schools have experienced declines in their student proficiency rates in both ELA and Math. These drops were more severe for schools with higher proficiency rates prior to the pandemic. Additionally, while high school students have historically demonstrated lower proficiency rates than elementary school students, proficiency declines since the pandemic were far greater in younger grades.

Student Proficiency in Grades K-8

In 2022, 16% of Milwaukee students demonstrated grade-level proficiency in ELA on the most recent state Forward Exam, and 13% demonstrated grade-level proficiency in Math. This compares to 20% in ELA and 18% in Math in Spring 2019, the last pre-pandemic round of state assessments. By school sector (*Figure 1*):

- 14% of students in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) were proficient in ELA, 9% in Math.
- 20% of students attending public charter schools were proficient in ELA, 18% in Math.
- 18% of students attending private schools using Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) vouchers were proficient in ELA, 15% in Math.

Student Proficiency in Grades 9-12

Overall, 14% of Milwaukee students demonstrated proficiency in ELA on the most recent ACT and ACT Aspire exams, and 9% demonstrated proficiency in Math. This compares to 16% in ELA and 10% in Math in Spring 2019. By school sector (*Figure 2*):

- 14% of students in MPS-operated schools were proficient in ELA, 8% in Math.
- 13% of students in public charter schools were proficient in ELA, 9% in Math.
- 17% of students attending private schools using MPCP vouchers were proficient in ELA, 13% in Math.

Figure 1

Student Proficiency Among All Students By School Sector

Forward Exam proficiency of students in grades K-8.

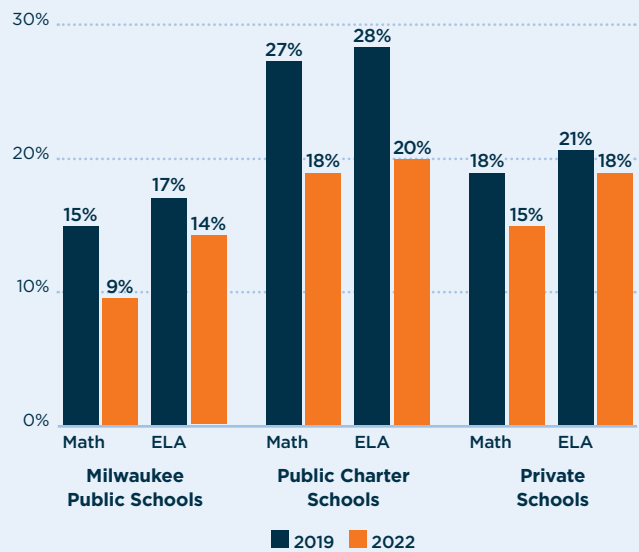
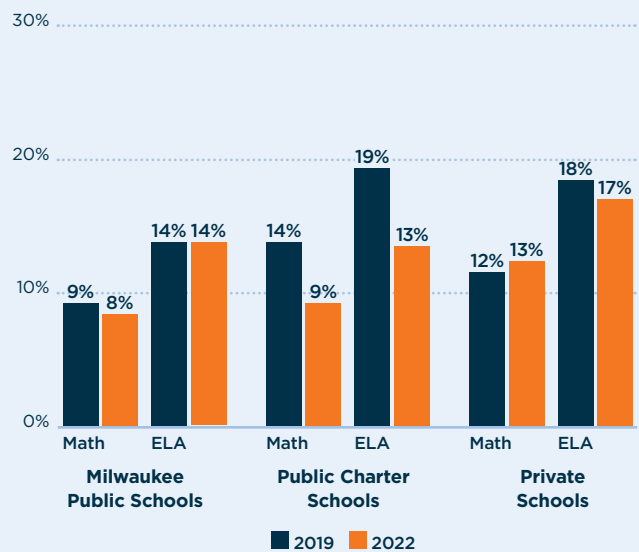


Figure 2

Student Proficiency Among All Students By School Sector

ACT and ACT Aspire proficiency of students in grades 9-11.



Student Proficiency Nationally

Using data from The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), commonly referred to as “the Nation’s Report Card,” we can compare Milwaukee’s outcomes with national outcomes. Every other year, Milwaukee’s fourth and eighth grade students participate in this testing.¹ When compared to other large urban districts, Milwaukee’s math and reading scores are amongst the worst in the nation, and Milwaukee students outperform only one other large city (Detroit). This trend has not

changed in several years, and disparities between racial subgroups have only increased (*Figure 3*).

Milwaukee is particularly failing its Black students, which accounts for half of its student population, as fewer than one in 10 black students are proficient in math and reading. While one in three students identify as Hispanic, fewer than one in five Hispanic students were proficient in math and reading (*Figure 4*).

Figure 3

Milwaukee NAEP Average Scores, 2009–2022

Disparities between white, Black and Hispanic students have worsened over time.

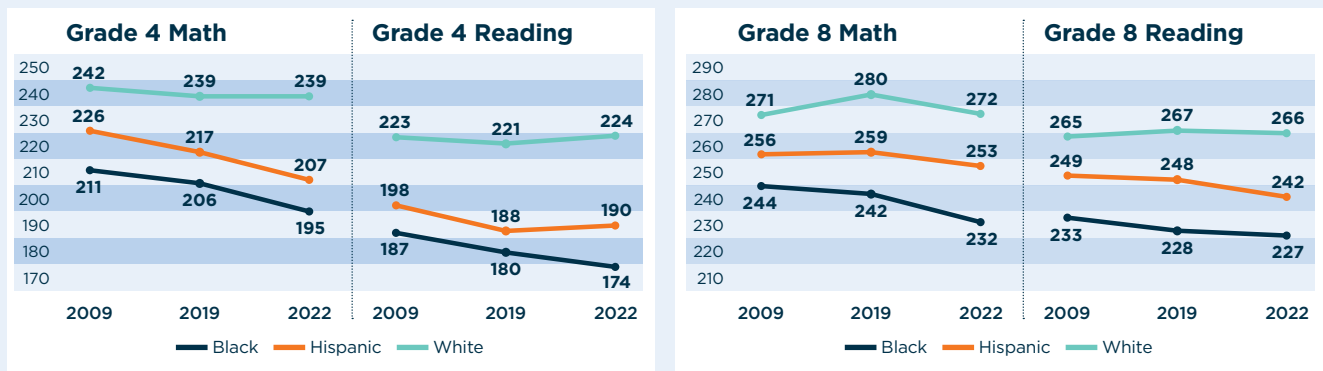
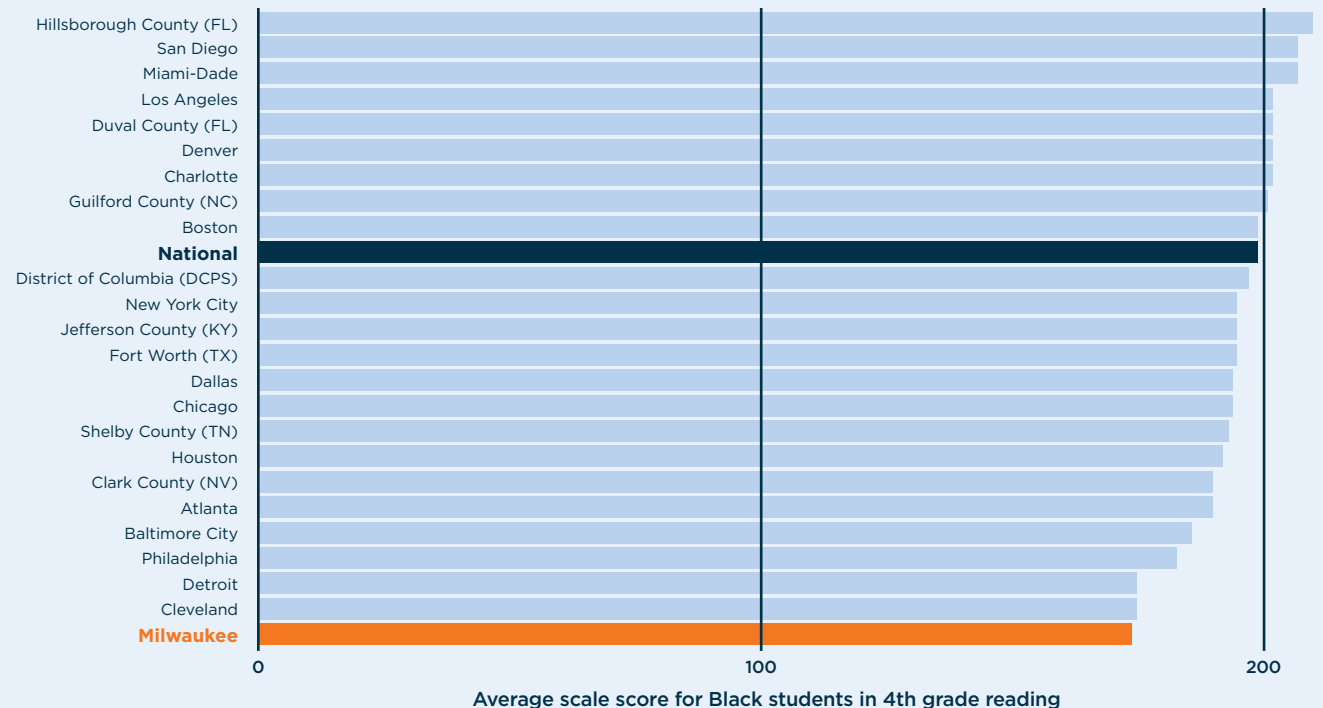


Figure 4

Milwaukee is failing its Black students

Milwaukee is at the absolute bottom when it comes to Black student proficiency.



¹ <https://dpi.wi.gov/assessment/naep>

Milwaukee School Quality on State Report Cards

Student proficiency is one component of evaluating student progress and school efficacy in Wisconsin. The primary metric for measuring the quality of K-12 schools in Milwaukee is the School Report Card produced by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI). Every school serving publicly funded students receives a School Report Card, and each Report Card provides an Overall Score and a corresponding Overall Accountability Rating category that determines whether the school or district is meeting the expectations set by the state. The Overall Score itself is a combination of four sub-scores (known as Priority Areas) on the Report Card:²

- Achievement is a measure of how much students know, similar to student proficiency. The Achievement score is calculated from the annual state assessments mentioned above.³
- Growth is a measure of how much students are learning over the course of a year.

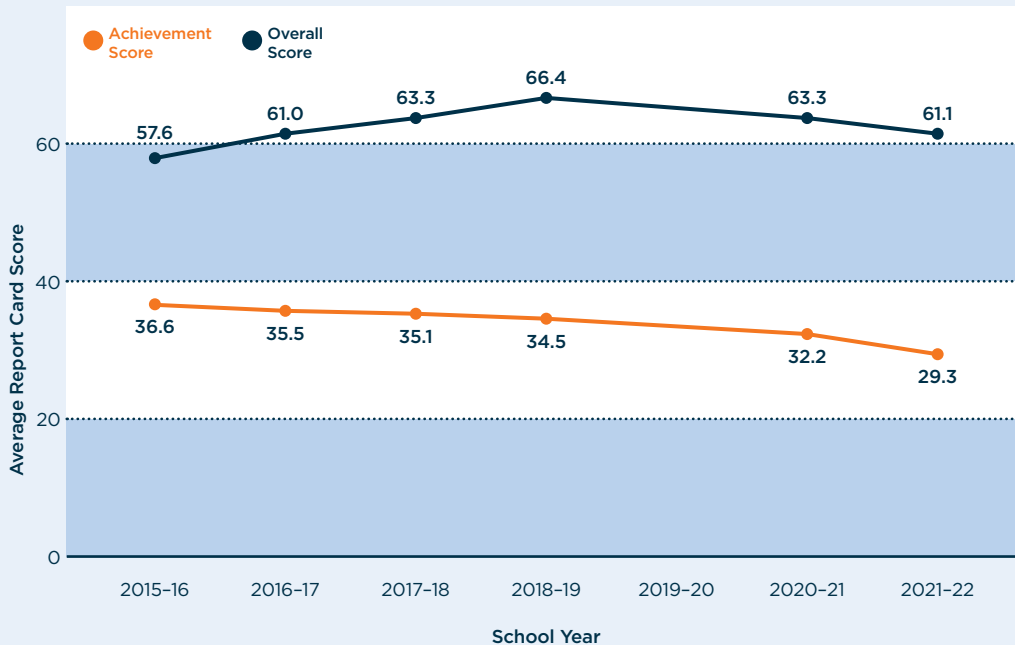
- Target Group Outcomes is a measure of how well a school or district is serving its students most in need of support (defined as the bottom 25% of students by the previous year's state assessment tests).
- On-Track to Graduation is a measure of how well students are prepared to graduate high school on time.

In Milwaukee, changes in School Report Card Overall Scores have not been reflective of changes in student achievement at those schools (*Figure 5*). Prior to the pandemic, Overall Scores were increasing every year, seeming to indicate that schools in Milwaukee were improving. Since 2018-19, though, scores have been in decline. This shift is not a direct response to student achievement outcomes. Rather, Overall Scores have been changing due to changes in the technical methodology used to compute the scores.

Figure 5

Milwaukee Overall Scores don't follow Student Achievement

Since the 2015-2016 school year, changes in school Overall Scores have not been reflective in changes in student achievement, which has dropped every single year.



Averages are weighted for school enrollment. No schools received scores in 2019-20.

² More information on how Report Card scores are calculated can be found in DPI's Report Card Technical Guide: https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/accountability/pdf/Report_Card_Technical_Guide_2021-22_10_17_2022.pdf
³ The Achievement score is calculated using the previous three years of state assessment data, with more recent years and higher student proficiency weighted more heavily to earn a school more points. However, because this score usually counts for such a small proportion of a school's overall score in Milwaukee, student proficiency is unlikely to significantly impact a school's score.

The Report Card system is designed to consider data from multiple school years when assessing school performance. With each passing year, the still-relatively new system has had more data available to calculate scores for each component area of the Report Cards. This has had the unintended side effect of improving Overall Scores.⁴

In 2021, DPI made significant changes to several of the Report Card's scoring components:

- The Closing Gaps subcategory was eliminated and replaced with a new subcategory called Target Group Outcomes;
- The On-Track and Postsecondary Readiness subcategory was altered and renamed On-Track to Graduation; and
- The Student Engagement Indicators (which could result in two 5-point deductions to the Overall Score) were removed entirely.

Most significantly, the Overall Score ranges that determined the star rating for a school were adjusted in 2021, the net result being that schools could have lower scores than in the past to meet expectations (Table 1).

These changes to the Report Card are significant, and because the underlying components are so different, it is difficult to compare pre-pandemic scores to those we see today.

If we compare School Report Cards released in 2022 to those released in 2021, we see a drop in the proportion of students enrolled in schools meeting the state's expectations (Figure 6). In 2021, over 70% of students in the city were enrolled in schools that were rated "Meets Expectations" or higher. In 2022, that figure dropped to just over 60% of students. Still, these numbers are in stark contrast with citywide student proficiency, which tells us that four out of five students in the city can't read, write, or do math on grade level. Put another way: Students are no more proficient in Milwaukee than they were six years ago, despite higher Report Card Overall Scores.

Table 1

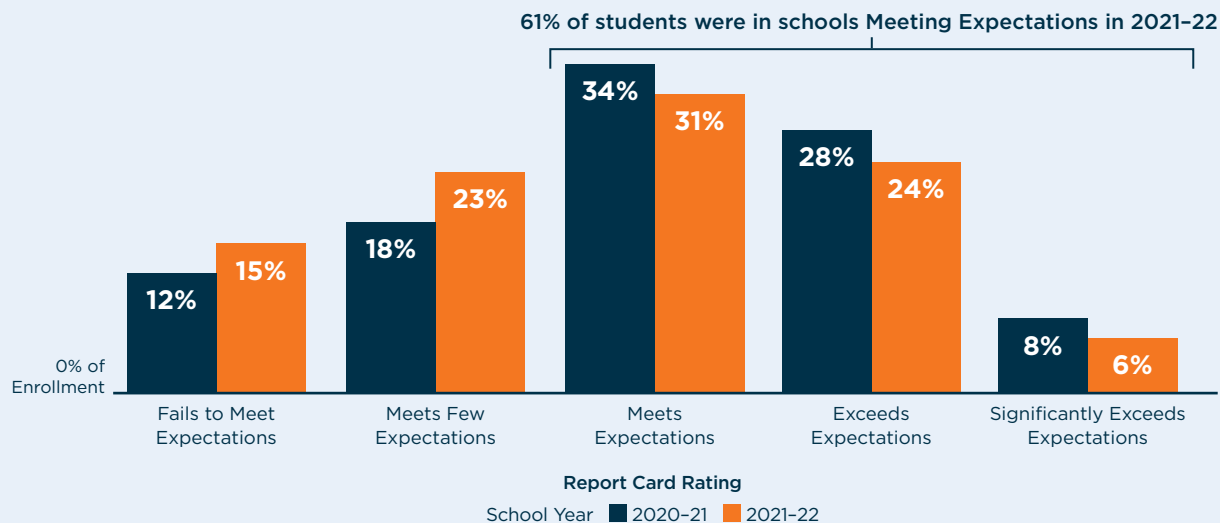
Report Card Rating Categories	Old Rating Category Ranges	New Rating Category Ranges
Significantly Exceeds Expectations	83.0-100	83.0-100
Exceeds Expectations	73.0-82.9	70.0-82.9
Meets Expectations	63.0-72.9	58.0-69.9
Meets Few Expectations	53.0-62.9	48.0-57.9
Fails to Meet Expectations	0-52.9	0-47.9

Source: <https://dpi.wi.gov/accountability/report-cards>

Figure 7

Report Card Ratings of Milwaukee Schools

6 out of 10 Milwaukee students are enrolled in schools meeting the state's expectations even though fewer than 1 in 5 are able to read, write, and do math on grade level.*



*The 1 in 5 rate is based on proficiency rates from the statewide assessment tests which form the foundation of Report Card scores

⁴ (This is especially noteworthy for private schools participating in the Parental Choice voucher program, which were added to the Report Card system more recently than traditionally operated district and public charter schools.)

Access Inequities

Though six in ten Milwaukee students are enrolled in a school that is rated “Meets Expectations” or better, differences exist between the various student subgroups in the city. Notably, over half of students with disabilities were served by schools that did not meet expectations in 2022, the highest proportion of any student group (Figure 7). When comparing racial subgroups, Black students were the least likely to attend a high-quality school, with more than two out of every five black students enrolled in schools not meeting the state’s expectations. A similar proportion of economically disadvantaged students were enrolled in low-quality schools, as was a slightly smaller proportion of Hispanic students.

Student enrollment in schools meeting expectations or better also differs between the sectors. Fewer than one in two students in MPS are enrolled in a school meeting the state’s expectations. Conversely, four out of five students in public charter schools and private choice schools are enrolled in schools meeting expectations or better (Figure 8).

Persistently Underperforming Schools

Among the schools that are not meeting the state’s expectations, there is a group that has received the lowest possible rating (“Fails to Meet Expectations”, or one star) for three or more consecutive years. City Forward Collective designates these schools as persistently underperforming.

In 2021–2022, 13 schools (serving 8,797 students) were persistently underperforming. All 13 of these schools were traditionally operated MPS schools. This means that 15% of all MPS students were enrolled in a school that has continuously failed to meet expectations.

High schools make up a disproportionate number of these schools. Of the 13 schools, seven were high schools serving grades 9–12, and another two served grades K–12. The rest served elementary grades. The prevalence of high schools on the list is indicative of our city’s struggle to serve students at these grades. Student proficiency is lowest in high schools, as is student enrollment.

No schools from the private or public charter sectors are on the list of persistently underperforming schools. Charter schools are held to a unique level of oversight when compared to other sectors, because they must be authorized by a separate government entity. The school and authorizer form a contractual agreement that articulates how the school will operate and what performance targets it must meet. After a set period of time (usually 3–5 years), the authorizer reviews the school’s performance and determines whether to renew the contract. These requirements mean persistently underperforming charter schools quickly close.

Figure 7

Inconsistent Access to High Quality Schools

Over half of Milwaukee’s students with disabilities are enrolled in low quality schools, the highest proportion of any student subgroup. Black students show the second highest with proportion 44% enrolled in low quality schools.

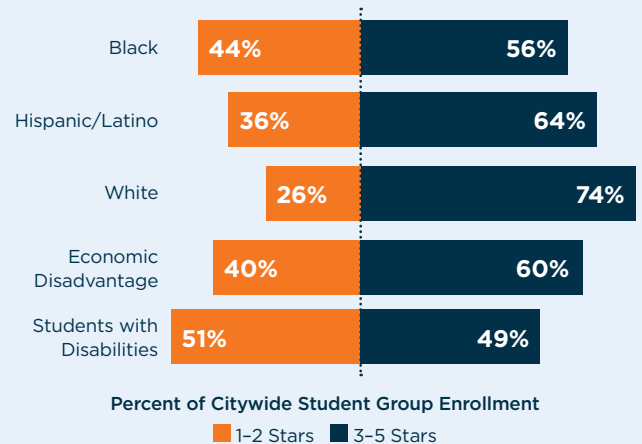
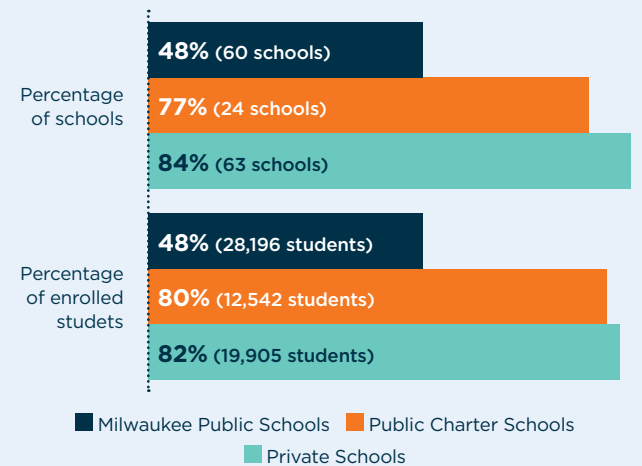


Figure 8

Schools Earning ‘Meets Expectations’ Or Higher By School Sector

Private and Public Charter schools were more likely to at least ‘Meet Expectations.’



Private schools are not held to the same level of contractual oversight as public charter schools. Rather, their absence from the list of persistently underperforming schools can be explained by their improved Priority Area scores over the past couple years, especially the Growth score.

Student Achievement & Growth on State Report Cards

We explained above that while School Report Cards tell us most Milwaukee schools are meeting expectations, most Milwaukee students can't read, write, or do math at grade level. One of the main reasons for this disconnect is how the Achievement and Growth priority areas are combined when a school's Overall Score is calculated. In most Milwaukee schools, the student Achievement score counts for just 5% of a school's Overall Score on their Report Card, whereas Growth counts for 45%. In other words, **Growth is nine times more important than Achievement on the Report Cards.**⁵ This is why we can see citywide Achievement Scores drop without seeing a commensurate drop in Overall Scores.

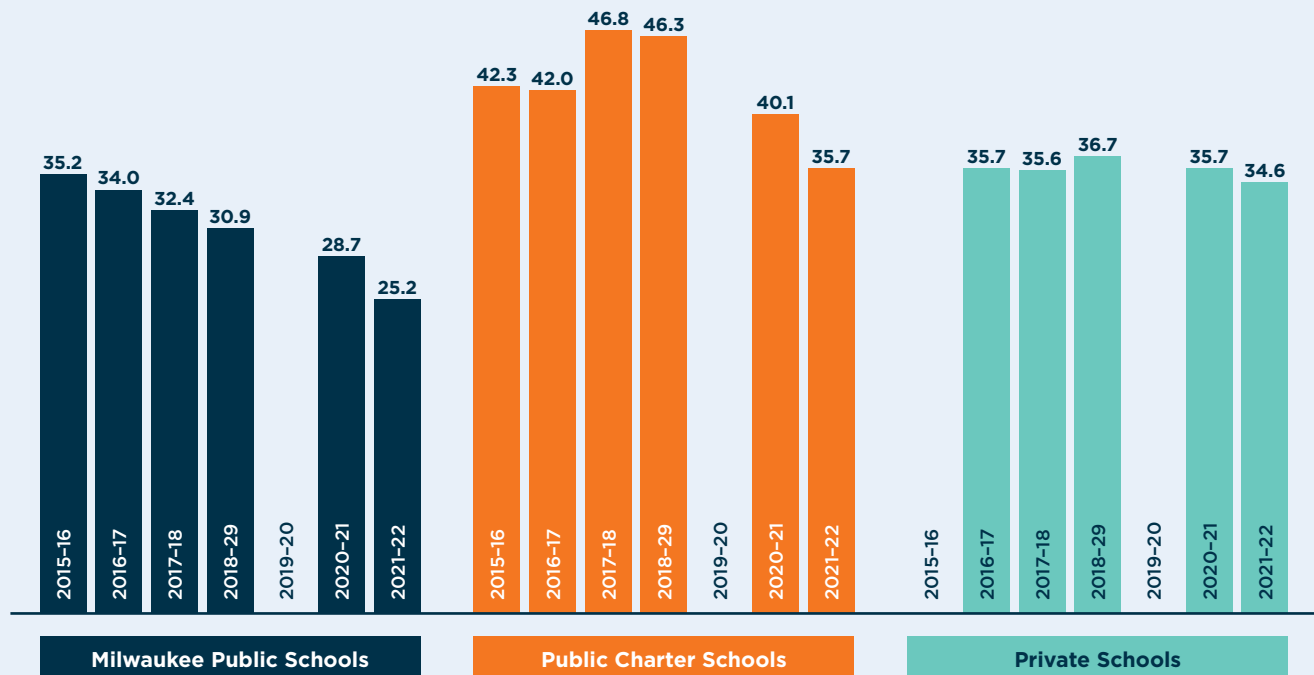
If we break things down by sector, we really see three different stories (*Figure 9*):

1. MPS Achievement scores have been in decline for several years.
2. Public Charter Schools, which had the highest Achievement scores pre-pandemic, have dropped significantly in the past two years.
3. Private schools have held Achievement scores fairly steady, with just a slight drop since the pandemic.

Figure 9

Achievement Score Change by Sector

Achievement scores have held steadiest for private schools in recent years, while scores for MPS have steadily declined, and the previously highest-scoring Public Charter Schools have dropped to about the same level as private schools.



Averages are weighted for school enrollment. There was not enough data in 2015-16 to produce scores for Private Choice Schools. No schools received scores in 2019-20.

⁵ The relative weighting of Achievement and Growth is known as variable weighting, and it is determined by a formula that accounts for the percentage of economically disadvantaged students in the school. This formula was written by the Wisconsin Legislature, not DPI, and it therefore must be changed by the Legislature.

The story for Growth scores is similar (Figure 10):

1. MPS scores have held steady over the years but remain at a level that is below average.
2. Growth at public charter schools has dropped from well above average to about average since the pandemic.
3. Private school Growth has grown to be the highest among sectors since the pandemic.

Since we know that Growth makes up the largest proportion of the Overall Score at most Milwaukee schools, it is now easier to understand why all 13 of the persistently underperforming schools we mentioned above are MPS schools. Growth scores for MPS schools have sustained a below-average level for all years since

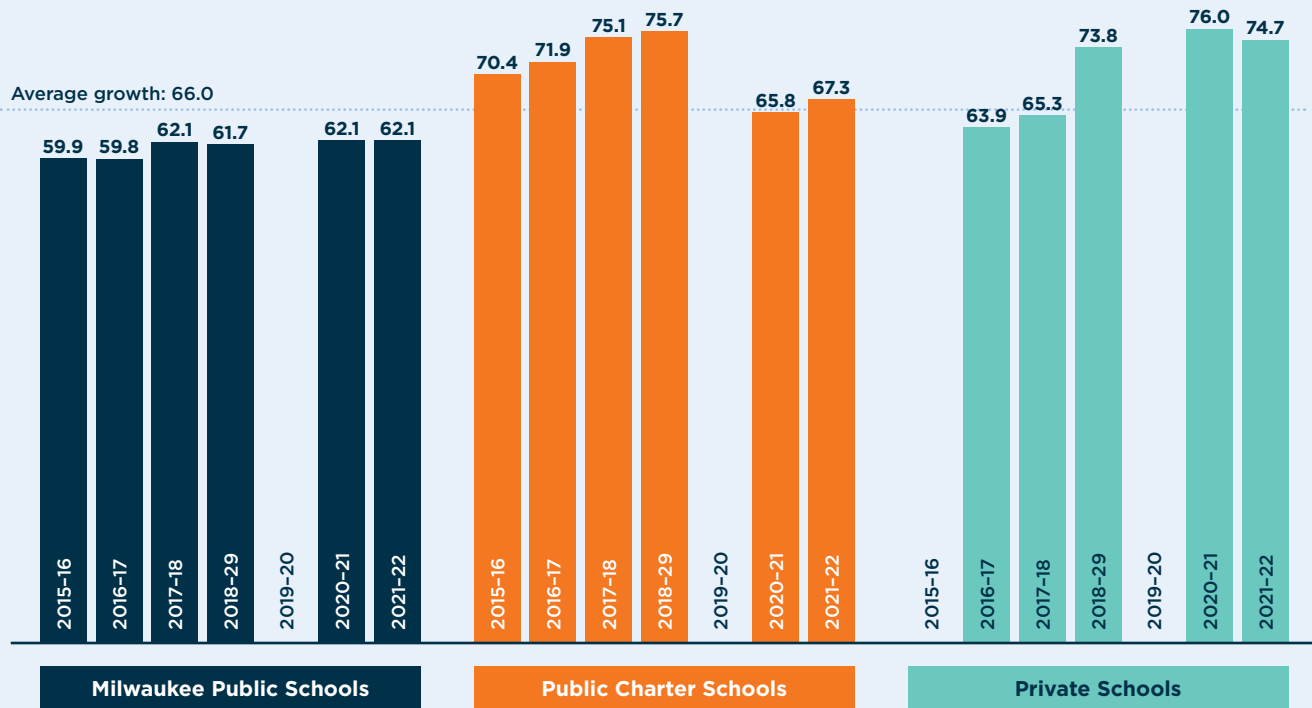
the 2015–16 school year, whereas public charter schools and private schools have shown Growth scores well above average. With such high Growth scores, it's no surprise that no schools in either of those sectors has been rated one star for three or more consecutive years.

Achievement and Growth are both important measures of student outcomes, and they should both be included in the Overall Score calculation. Overweighting student growth in high poverty schools awards top ratings to some schools which are failing to get students fully caught up, while punishing some schools where students already at grade level are growing at a more typical rate. Further, the overweighting of Growth results in our current circumstance where most schools are meeting the state's expectations while failing to ensure that students can read, write, and do math at grade level.

Figure 10

Growth Score by Sector

Prior to the pandemic, the highest growth scores were in public charter schools, but for the past two years, private schools have had the highest scores.



Averages are weighted for school enrollment. There was not enough data in 2015–16 to produce scores for Private Choice Schools. No schools received scores in 2019–20.

Appendix: Glossary of Terms

STUDENT DEFINITIONS (WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION)

Students with Disabilities	Have a qualifying impairment requiring an individualized education program (IEP) entitling them to additional learning supports and resources. ⁶
Economically Disadvantaged	From a household with an income no greater than 185% of Federal Poverty Guidelines or other designation. ⁷
Limited English Proficiency	Learning English as a second language, identified through a federally mandated annual assessment. ⁸

DATA GROUPS

Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS)	Refers to schools operated by MPS staff. This includes Traditional Public Schools and Instrumentality Charter Schools. It does not include 2r/2x or Independent charters, Non-Instrumentality Charter Schools, or Partnership schools.
Public Charter Schools	Includes autonomous charter schools (Independent and Non-Instrumentality). Does not include Instrumentality Charter schools, which are operated directly by MPS staff.
Public Schools Outside Milwaukee	Includes only Open Enrollment and Chapter 220 students enrolled in suburban school districts.
Private Schools	Includes students attending private schools using a state-funded tuition voucher through the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), Special Needs Scholarship Program (SNSP), or Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP).
Public Schools	Refers to all schools that are free for all children to attend and overseen by a governmental body (Traditional Public and all charter schools, including Independent Charters).

⁶ <https://dpi.wi.gov/wise/data-elements/disability>

⁷ <https://dpi.wi.gov/wise/data-elements/econ-status>

⁸ <https://dpi.wi.gov/wise/data-elements/elp>

SCHOOL TYPES	
2r/2x or Independent Charter Schools	The terms “2r/2x” and “Independent Charter” are used interchangeably to indicate charter schools fully independent from a school district. In Milwaukee, these schools are authorized by either the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee or the City of Milwaukee Common Council.
Instrumentality Charter Schools	A charter school authorized by the Milwaukee Board of School Directors, operated by MPS, and staffed by MPS employees.
Non-Instrumentality Charter Schools	A charter school authorized by the Milwaukee Board of School Directors but operated by an independent 501c3 nonprofit and staffed by employees of that nonprofit.
Partnership Schools	Refers to independent schools contracted by MPS to work with specific student populations, such as those identified by the district as at-risk of dropping out. These schools are operated by community organizations based on parameters of the contract with MPS.
Private Schools	Refers to independent schools that charge tuition, which may be paid by a tuition voucher through the state’s Choice programs.
Traditional Public Schools	Schools operated directly by MPS without a charter contract, e.g. excluding Instrumentality and other types of charter schools.

PROGRAMS	
Chapter 220	State-funded voluntary racial desegregation program that funded transportation for Milwaukee-area students to attend schools in neighboring districts.
Open Enrollment	State program which allows any Wisconsin student to apply to attend a traditional public school in a nonresident school district.
Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP)	State-funded program which allows students in households below a certain economic threshold (300% of the federal poverty limit) to obtain a tuition voucher to attend a participating private school. Students must live within the Milwaukee city limits to qualify for this program.
Special Needs Scholarship Program (SNSP)	Allows a student with an identified disability to obtain a tuition voucher from the state to attend a participating private school.
Wisconsin Parental Choice Program (WPCP)	State-funded program which allows students in households below a certain economic threshold (220% of federal poverty limit) to obtain a tuition voucher to attend a participating private school. Students must live in Wisconsin, but cannot live within the city limits of either Milwaukee or Racine to qualify for this program.