

Questions and Answers Regarding the New 2002-03 WKCE Proficiency Levels

June 23, 2003

Introduction

In November of 2002, all fourth, eighth, and tenth grade students participated in new or revised statewide assessments in the subject areas of Reading, Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies (the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations, WKCE). Based on how students score on these assessments, they are placed in one of four *proficiency categories*: advanced, proficient, basic, and minimal performance. Statewide standardized test scores are reported by the following proficiency categories:

- Advanced:*** Demonstrates in-depth understanding of academic knowledge and skills tested on WKCE.
- Proficient:*** Demonstrates competency in the academic knowledge and skills tested on WKCE.
- Basic:*** Demonstrates some academic knowledge and skills tested on WKCE.
- Minimal Performance:*** Demonstrates very limited academic knowledge and skills tested on WKCE.

In February of 2003, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction engaged in a bookmarking process to determine the cut scores in each proficiency category for the new or revised state assessments. In other words, the bookmarking process establishes what we want students to know and be able to do in each proficiency category.

Process

1) Q. How was the bookmarking process conducted?

- A. The Department of Public Instruction contracted with CTB/McGraw-Hill, the state testing services vendor, to conduct the Bookmarking Standards-setting process. This research-based process was developed by CTB/McGraw-Hill and has been used in over 28 states since 1996 to establish performance expectations on statewide assessments. The state superintendent invited a group of 240 individuals—educators, parents, and community members—to participate in this process. Each panel represented a diversity based on race/ethnicity, gender, and geography, enriching the decision making process. Participants were assigned to panels based on their academic area of expertise and participated in a rigorous and structured process focused on content-based decision making. Cut-scores were not established using a mathematical formula but rather represent what these expert panelists believe students need to know to be proficient in each testing area at the *beginning* of the school year.

The panel recommendations were advisory. The panelists' cut score recommendations were reviewed by a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC), appointed by the state superintendent to analyze the quality of the process and the recommended cut-scores for each proficiency level. The TAC was made up of three nationally recognized experts in the field of testing and measurement: William A. Mehrens, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, Michigan State University; Andrew Porter, Ph.D., Wisconsin Center for Education Research, UW-Madison; and Floraline Stevens, Ph.D., Evaluation Consultant (Retired, Director of Program Evaluation and Assessment, Los Angeles Unified School District).

The TAC conducted a thorough review of the process and the data and drafted a formal report for the state superintendent, recommending that she accept the cut-scores set by the panelists for each proficiency category, publish a summary report of the process, and develop academic descriptors to support understanding of what academic skills are measured. The state superintendent reviewed the work of the panelists, the report and recommendations from the TAC, and set new cut scores as recommended by the panelists.

2) Q. What impact did this process have?

- A. This valid and reliable process conducted by over 240 educators provided us with a current definition of advanced, proficient, basic, and minimal proficiency categories.

Test

3) Q. Why did the tests change?

- A. The tests were changed to comply with a federal mandate to fully assess all of the Wisconsin Model Academic Standards. The tests were either "customized" or "enhanced" to achieve alignment with our Model Academic Standards. This alignment process should provide a more accurate reflection of how well students are doing at meeting the Wisconsin Model Academic Standards. Just as in the past, multiple forms of these tests will be used over a period of years to assess Wisconsin students. The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 mandates further test changes in the 2005-06 school year when all grades three through eight will have annual assessments for accountability purposes in reading and mathematics.

4) Q. Have our standards changed?

- A. The Wisconsin Model Academic Standards have not changed. The new assessments are aligned to more accurately measure attainment of all the standards. These new cut scores better articulate what a student must know and be able to do at the beginning of the tested grade to successfully meet the expectations of that grade level. This will provide a greater focus on the standards and will assist educators as they make important decisions regarding the implementation of the grade advancement policy.

5) Q. When will the tests change again?

- A. Our next challenge will be to meet the NCLB requirement to test all students in grades three through eight on an annual basis in reading and math in 2005-06. DPI plans to develop customized assessments in reading and math at grades three through eight. DPI will continue to review the state testing system to determine if it meets our objectives for accountability and for providing helpful information to districts and schools.

Scores

6) Q. Can this year's test scores be compared with prior years?

- A. It is very difficult to accurately compare this year's scores with past years for two basic reasons. First, the tests are different. New test questions were added at the fourth- and eighth-grade levels and the tests were entirely customized at the tenth-grade level. Second, the cut scores for each proficiency category are different based on the bookmarking process conducted in February by 240 educators.

Because these tests are unique to Wisconsin based on the state's model academic standards, we have no national norms and thus no national percentiles for comparisons at the national level.

7) Q. There are more students in the Proficient and Advanced categories. Why?

- A. Some cut scores resulted in more students falling in the Proficient and Advanced level at certain grades and subjects while others increased the number of students in the Minimal and Basic categories. Two changes occurred that contributed to this difference. First, the assessments are different from those given in the past. As a result of an effort to improve alignment of our state assessments to Wisconsin Academic Standards, the current year's assessments use some new test items. As a result, it is difficult to compare the proficiency rates between these test years. Second, the previous cut scores were based on what students ideally should know and be able to do at the end of the grade. This year, the panelists were asked to determine the cut scores based on what a student must know and be able to do at the beginning of the tested grade, as this is when the tests will now be administered, to successfully meet the expectations of that grade level.

8) Q. Have kids gotten smarter?

- A. These tests are not designed to determine the "smartness" of kids. They can be informative in determining how well children are accomplishing our state standards, and may be useful at the district and school level in identifying areas that need to be strengthened. Because they are a "snapshot," they do not provide enough information to only judge individual student achievement. They are often used in conjunction with other local assessments to provide a deeper understanding of individual student needs.

Impact on Instruction

- 9) **Q. How will schools and districts use the results of the WSAS assessment to improve instruction?**
- A. School districts consider the test results along with other assessment data to prepare their instructional improvement plans. These plans are used by the districts to set goals for improving curriculum and instruction where needed.
- 10) **Q. How does all this affect the teacher in the classroom and what he/she teaches my child?**
- A. These test results, along with district- and classroom-based assessment data, are used by teachers and administrators to determine if changes need to be made in content taught, instructional strategies used, or instructional materials purchased.
- 11) **Q. Will teachers teach to the test?**
- A. Teachers teach the content as described in the state standards and any additional standards established by the local school board.
- 12) **Q. Can this test be used to improve instruction?**
- A. The results of these tests along with other assessment data that the schools collect provide the base for decision making about changing instructional practice. The other data that districts and teachers collect and use is more extensive and provides information that cannot be covered in large scale tests.

Impact on Schools

- 13) **Q. How do proficiency scores relate to the federal NCLB accountability requirements?**
- A. NCLB requires all schools and districts to ensure that all students will be proficient or better on statewide assessments in reading and math by 2014. The state must establish annual benchmarks for the percentage of students that must be advanced or proficient. These annual benchmarks must include incremental gains at least every three years. By 2014 the annual benchmark will be 100% proficiency or advanced for all students. Schools and districts that meet the annual benchmarks will have made the required “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP). Failure to meet AYP for two consecutive years will result in a school or district being classified as a “School or District Identified for Improvement.” Schools and districts receiving federal Title I funding will be subject to federal sanctions for being identified in improvement status.

14) Q. Do the new tests and proficiency levels affect the number of schools not making AYP?

- A. Because of the rigorous nature of the new accountability requirements, it is anticipated that there will be a greater number of schools identified for improvement in the ensuing years. The Wisconsin Accountability System required under NCLB was approved by the USED on May 20, 2003. The state assessments completed in November 2002 will be subject to the new accountability system for the first time.