



February 6, 2025

**Assembly Committee on Education
Department of Public Instruction Testimony
2025 AB1**

I want to thank Chair Kitchens and members of the committee for the opportunity to give testimony on AB 1. My name is Tom McCarthy, Deputy State Superintendent for the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and with me today is Viji Somasundaram and Sam Bohrod, leaders in our Office of Education Accountability.

We are here to testify in opposition to AB1.

The DPI believes that each Wisconsin learner deserves access to rigorous and engaging instruction and that transparency in measuring and reporting the progress of student learning is necessary and important. We also believe in using teachers as experts in child development and knowledge of Wisconsin's academic standards.

While this bill is focused on assessment and report cards, these activities do not happen in isolation. Assessment is directly connected to instruction, and instruction is directly connected to Wisconsin's academic standards. Report cards provide a measure of not only assessment, but also other key data indicators of a school and district's success.

We intend to provide some background information on standards, instruction, and assessment, how the NAEP assessment is different from our state summative assessments, and then some technical reasons why this bill is problematic.

To ensure rigorous instruction for all learners, the DPI establishes grade-level standards in math and English language arts, and grade-band standards in science, social studies, and other content areas. All these standards are on a seven-year review cycle and Wisconsin educators (both public and private), post-secondary education experts, relevant business owners or leaders, and members of the public, including family members, all have the opportunity to provide feedback and input. Members of the legislature who sit on the State Superintendent's Academic Standards Review Council, and members of the education committees of both houses also had the opportunity to provide feedback during the review and revisions process.

Day-to-day classroom instruction builds from academic standards, and, under Wisconsin state statute and Federal law, we evaluate learning by administering annual standardized assessments that are aligned to the academic standards. Students in public schools, independent charter schools, and many Choice schools take these assessments. School and district report cards display the results of those annual standardized assessments, along with other school data for the public to understand what's happening within their school or district. These report cards serve as an important tool for school leaders, educators, and families to understand the strengths and areas

for improvement at the school and district level. School and district report cards are used by school leaders to make decisions about curriculum, scope and sequence of instruction, and professional learning for educators. They are used by families to see a limited snapshot in time of their child's knowledge and understanding of the state's grade-level standards. Most important, they are designed to act as a flashlight – to illuminate where things are working or need improvement – and not as a policy hammer – a tool to make decisions about school governance.

While state summative assessments, like the Forward exam, the PreACT Secure, and the ACT with Writing in Wisconsin, measure what Wisconsin children know and can do in relationship to our specific state academic standards, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) measures what the nation's students know and can do in several content areas. It is a common tool to gather information about students across the country and is used to evaluate long-term trends.

NAEP and the Wisconsin summative assessments differ in some important ways. While the Forward exam, the PreACT Secure, and the ACT with Writing are given to all learners in Wisconsin public schools, independent charter schools, and some Choice and private schools every year, the NAEP is not. NAEP is given to a representative sample of 4th, 8th, and 12th graders every two years. A small number of Wisconsin schools are selected to sit for the NAEP and within those schools, only some learners are identified to take the NAEP. In 2024, approximately 5,300 out of 56,000 Wisconsin 4th graders and approximately 5,200 out of 59,000 Wisconsin 8th graders took the NAEP. Ultimately, student participation is highly encouraged, but voluntary. Wisconsin summative assessments are required, although families do have the power to opt their children out. While individual student results are reported to families with the Forward exam, the PreACT Secure, and the ACT with Writing, the NAEP is not designed to produce individual student results. Wisconsin educators work on Forward assessment question (item) development to ensure they are aligned to Wisconsin academic standards. They have no role in NAEP assessment development.

Assessment Considerations

The DPI understands the intent of the bill's authors to ensure there is a reliable way of measuring student and school progress from year to year and agrees that this is important.

The DPI also acknowledges that expectations for student learning change over time. If one looks at Wisconsin's academic standards in the year 2000, you will see that they are vastly different from the academic standards in place today. Our current standards in reading (part of the English Language Arts (ELA) Standards), for example, are much more specific and include areas of instruction not in place as recently as 2010, such as phonemic awareness and letter-sound knowledge. These areas that we now know are critical to reading instruction were added and expanded in the current version (adopted in 2020).

When academic standards are revised, our summative assessments must also be revised so that we are in compliance with state and federal law, and more importantly, so that learners are tested on what is being taught in their classes. DPI convenes teachers to review the test questions (items), determine whether they accurately align to the academic standards, and make recommendations about assessment cut scores supported by DPI experts in test validity, reliability, and psychometrics.

NAEP assessments, on the other hand, are based on the NAEP content frameworks, which are

more limited than our state standards and only available for the tested grade-levels and content areas. While there is some overlap between Wisconsin's academic standards and the content frameworks used by NAEP, there are significant differences, which result in significant differences between the Forward exam and NAEP. Further, since the NAEP is only given in grades 4, 8, and 12, NAEP does not define grade-level performance¹

The method to compare achievement in schools in Wisconsin to that of other states requires using a consistent measure; that is what the NAEP was designed to do and it is how the actual NAEP results are used. The DPI has never used the Forward Exam as the basis of comparison with other states. Additionally, NAEP results are not used in making instructional decisions in Wisconsin classrooms.

In contrast, the Forward Exam is administered only to students in Wisconsin, is designed to assess students' knowledge of the Wisconsin Academic Standards which is the basis of classroom instruction and supports school improvement efforts within the state.

When academic standards are revised the state assessments need to be revised with new test items and a review of proficiency levels by educators and psychometricians. Wisconsin's science standards were revised in 2017, so the science section of the Forward exam was changed in 2019. Wisconsin's social studies standards were revised in 2018, so the social studies section of the Forward exam was changed in 2022. Wisconsin's English language arts standards were revised in 2020, and Wisconsin's math standards were revised in 2021. Wisconsin Act 20 from 2023, also included new report card requirements in reading. To align to the revised standards and the new Act 20 requirements, the ELA and math sections of the Forward exam were changed in 2024. And, for the first time ever, a comprehensive assessment of reading skills was developed and launched in 2024 as a third part of the Forward exam. **This means that the 2024 Forward exam was no longer the same assessment as the 2019 Forward exam.**

Additionally, in school year 2022-2023, ACT discontinued the assessment that Wisconsin was using in grades 9 and 10, the ACT Aspire.

Importantly, the 2019 Forward exam was based on 2011 academic standards and cut scores. **Therefore, to accurately measure and report the learning taking place in Wisconsin schools, DPI needed to engage in a process to review and revise the Forward assessment, including performance level cut scores on the Forward exam.**

This process started in 2022 with new test items and section development. In 2023, DPI responded to feedback from nearly 1,000 Wisconsin educators and stakeholders that the meaning of summative assessment performance levels was, at best, unclear to many educators or families and at worst, was psychologically damaging. DPI asked for stakeholder input on the descriptors of "below basic," "basic," "proficient," and "advanced." Stakeholders expressed the greatest confusion with the terms "basic" and "proficient," unclear of the difference and which might denote being on grade-level. Some stakeholders expressed that labeling results as "below basic" had the impact of some learners giving up, and some families and learners believing that label meant there was no possibility that they could advance into a different category; that it was perhaps a description of a child's IQ level. Based on the input and subsequent feedback, DPI changed the performance levels to "developing," "approaching," "meeting," and "advanced." The difference between "approaching" and "meeting" grade-level proficiency was clearer to stakeholders and the term "developing" helped both learners and families understand that it was possible for children to advance into a

different category.

The new Forward exam with major changes and the addition of the reading assessment was first administered to almost all students in grades 3 through 8 in the spring of 2024. In June 2024, a diverse group of almost 100 educators from around the state participated in a standard setting meeting to establish cut scores for the new Forward exam. Using what is known as the bookmark standard-setting process, the group recommended updated cut scores, in alignment with the updated academic standards and the revised ELA and mathematics Forward assessments.

In July 2024, ACT psychometricians led a diverse group of Wisconsin educators from around the state in a Wisconsin ACT performance level standard setting workshop to align performance levels and cut scores of the ACT assessments to the updated Wisconsin content standards. This standard setting was conducted for the ACT to align performance levels within the Wisconsin Student Assessment System (WSAS).

Each state is also required to pass a stringent federal peer review to ensure the accessibility, security, and technical quality of its federally required assessments. Wisconsin's assessments have been fully approved by this process. **Meeting federal peer review requirements would be challenging** if the proposed changes went into effect, as there are specific peer review requirements related to including stakeholders in the design of the assessment system and to establishing cut scores that are aligned to grade level standards in the Wisconsin academic standards.

Everything described above was done with the goal of raising academic rigor and providing meaningful data that can improve classroom teaching. The new performance level cut scores are directly linked with the academic standards that Wisconsin educators use on a daily basis in their classrooms. The results from the first administration of the updated Forward Exam clearly identify how students are performing relative to these Wisconsin standards and how schools are doing in comparison to each other.

I want to leave you with some testimonials from educators who were involved in the standard setting process:

From Michele, a WI Elementary ELA teacher

"When I think about the standard-setting process, I appreciate the opportunity to be part of a thoughtful, data-driven discussion about what students need to know and be able to do. This work is crucial for making sure our assessments are meaningful and reflect the educational goals set by educators.

From Celia, a WI elementary level Math teacher

"I have full confidence in the standard-setting process we engaged in during the summer of 2024. We had every CESA represented with math educators, math leaders, math interventionists, and math supervisors. These educators have invested their own education in learning about math education, have invested their careers in teaching or supporting educators in teaching math, and spent their summer bringing this knowledge base and experience to support the standards setting process for the FORWARD math assessment. There were multiple layers of norming as we first engaged in the process ourselves, then with a group, and with the whole group and finally, between groups. We spent days breaking down the standards and assessment items that match these standards. I very strongly believe that the scales that are currently used are reflective of our

state standards. Changing them without engaging in such a process would be placing arbitrary scores with assessments that give students, teachers, district leaders, and families no real evidence of the child's proficiency towards the state academic standards.”

From Marvina – elementary math teacher

“I fully support the standard-setting process and the updates to the Forward Exam. As an educator, I have confidence in the standard-setting process because it is grounded in a deep understanding of child development, learning, and the unique needs of Wisconsin students. The process allowed educators to come together to create assessments that are truly aligned with the updated Wisconsin Academic Standards, which reflect the evolving needs of our students. When I think about the standard-setting process, I appreciate how it was informed by the real, on-the-ground knowledge that educators bring to the table. The recommended cut scores and scale adjustments were thoughtfully determined to ensure that the Forward Exam accurately measures student growth and performance in the context of these updated standards. Reverting to old systems would not only undermine the hard work we did but also fail to keep up with the evolving needs of our students and the times we live in. It is crucial that our assessments continue to be aligned with the standards developed by Wisconsin educators, as they are the ones who understand how to best support our students' learning. Reverting to outdated scales, as some lawmakers are proposing, would undermine the hard work we did and diminish the value of the updated standards. I strongly believe that maintaining the new scale and test alignment will lead to a more accurate reflection of student achievement and progress. I am proud to have been part of this process and strongly believe in the value of the new scale and test alignment.”

School and District Report Card Considerations

The proposed bill, if enacted, requires the Department to align report card rating cut scores to the report cards released in the 2019-20 school year. The DPI agrees that the cut scores should be updated; however, instead of fixing report card scores to a given past school year, a report card standard setting involving experts, educators, and education stakeholders across Wisconsin is the appropriate way to update report card rating cut scores. This work is already underway.

AB1 also proposes to lock the school and district report card rating category cut scores to scores that were set in 2011-12. While the DPI agrees that the report card cut scores should be modified, the Department opposes this component of the bill as it has technical flaws, does not consider significant report card and assessment changes that have taken place since 2011-12, and would undo a report card standard setting that is already underway.

A technical challenge with the bill is that the assessment data approach from this legislation would result in report cards that would not be comparable to prior year report cards until 2027-28. As is standard practice in accountability systems, report cards use up to three years of achievement data in scoring. By modifying the assessment cut scores through this legislation, it would take three years of updated achievement scores to stabilize the data and allow for year-to-year report card comparison by parents and educators.

Several significant updates to report cards took place since their inception in 2011-12 that necessitate a report card standard setting to appropriately determine overall rating cut scores. Some of the changes have taken place legislatively, including variable weighting and value-added

growth (2015 Wisconsin Act 55). Other changes, including replacing the Closing Gaps priority area with Target Group Outcomes and converting absenteeism into dynamic scoring instead of a deduction, have been implemented through consultation with an accountability advisory group of choice school, charter school, and other public school stakeholders across the state.

Due to all these, a report card standard setting is needed rather than simply reverting to, and locking in, outdated scores. The DPI has begun preparations for the report card standard setting. We will include education stakeholders from across the state from choice, charter, and public schools and districts to ensure that our system reflects the input of key participants across Wisconsin.

Since the 2019-20 school year, DPI has:

- published new academic standards for ELA and mathematics (which schools have now implemented);
- updated the Forward Exam blueprints and test specifications for both ELA and mathematics;
- developed new performance level descriptors and achievement standards for ELA and mathematics; and,
- convened educators to recommend new cut scores for the Forward Exam that are in alignment with the new content standards and are based on grade level requirements.

DPI has made every effort to make report cards from 2011-12 through 2023-24 comparable from year to year. When necessary updates took place over the years the focus has been on maintaining consistency, transparency, and the intent of the Accountability Design Team. Updates have been made in consultation with our technical advisory committee and education stakeholders across the state. Updates to the systems have been implemented only when legislated or to ensure that the results were fair and representative. DPI has made few major changes to report cards, and only in response to issues in which outcomes were not representative. The OEA team staff consulted with Wisconsin's Accountability Technical Advisory Committee and education stakeholders from across the state for all major changes.

As a result, the school and district report cards have maintained integrity and comparability across years, since 2011. In contrast to neighboring states, Wisconsin's accountability system has remained largely stable since its inception in 2011-12. For example:

- The State of Michigan's school report cards have experienced substantial changes nearly every year since 2014-15, including a complete change to their rating system, the addition and removal of priority measures, and even a hiatus in reporting during the transition to a new state assessment.
- The State of Minnesota has likewise made similar one-year adjustments to calculations when necessary for comparability and used similar language to that used by DPI this past year; that state's best-practices rationale was the same as ours, "This adjustment is happening only once, as part of a historical recalculation. It will not be a routine part of graduation rate calculation going forward."
- The State of Iowa completely overhauled their accountability system in 2024, replacing the system in place from 2018.

The proposed legislation assumes that the state will continue to use the same student assessments in the future, with no changes to standards, blueprints, and scales. To the extent that changes are made to the assessments in the future, the proposed legislation is **likely to cause additional problems with respect to alignment with previous exams and school years.**

Thank you for allowing DPI to share this testimony. Please direct any questions to Laura Adams, Policy Initiatives Advisor, at laura.adams@dpi.wi.gov.