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DPI focuses on growth-based mindset in updated student performance level descriptors for standardized assessments

Overwhelming feedback in survey guides first update to terminology in nearly 10 years

MADISON – Following months of extensive engagement with internal and external education partners, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction is updating terminology used to describe performance levels on required statewide standardized assessments. The updated terms are intended to foster conversations promoting student potential and growth at every level.

“During my time as superintendent and dating back to when I was a district administrator, I’ve often heard confusion from parents, families, and legislators on what performance terms on tests meant in regard to where students are at academically,” State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly said. “We really wanted to hear from our experts, our educators, on how they talk about student performance on tests and try to use the language they use. This updated terminology is not only clearer, it also recognizes the endless potential each of our students has as learners.”

The terms *developing*, *approaching*, *meeting*, and *advanced* will replace the previous terms that have been used since 2014-15 – *below basic*, *basic*, *proficient*, and *advanced*. These updated terms will be used moving forward (beginning with assessments from the 2023-24 school year) on student reports for the Forward Exam, in addition to school, district, and state secure and public reports for the Forward Exam, ACT, and PreACT Secure.

The updated performance levels will be used in a formal standard setting meeting taking place from June 11-14, 2024. Around 100 educators will participate in this standard setting meeting, which takes place when a new or updated assessment is administered. Because new Forward Exam English language arts and mathematics tests were administered to students in grades 3-8 during spring 2024, this standard setting is required to establish achievement benchmarks. A similar process last took place in June 2016 after the previous Forward Exam ELA and mathematics assessments were administered for the first time. During

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standard setting, educators review live test questions in relation to the Wisconsin Academic Standards and recommend achievement benchmarks to the state superintendent.

In the [2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#), Wisconsin students noted a decrease in feeling like they belonged at school. Less than half (45 percent) of students who got a “C” letter grade, and just 24 percent of students who got a “D/F” said they felt like they belonged at school, survey data indicated. The updated performance level terms improve feelings of encouragement and motivation for all students, including those scoring lower on tests than their peers.

In December 2023, the DPI sent a survey to partners seeking feedback on potential updates to the descriptive terms. More than 800 responses and 500 comments were received from educators, administrators, parents, families, and education groups from across the state, with an overwhelming majority expressing support for descriptive terms focusing on a growth-based mindset.

A handout with more detail regarding the update can be found [on the DPI's website](#). Information on the Wisconsin Student Assessment System can also be found [on the DPI's website](#).

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