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Updated proficiency levels better reflect Wisconsin student performance

A guest editorial for publication by State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly

As a parent of two Wisconsin public school students, I pay close attention to how my kids are doing at school. We talk about how they are doing academically, as well as emotionally and socially. Like many caregivers, their well-being at school is a topic of conversation at my dinner table each night.

But despite my best efforts to stay informed, I often found myself confused by my kids' results on our state's required test, the Forward Exam, and what testing data actually means.

I've heard this same reaction from many families and educators over the years. What I learned was that our statewide assessment cut scores – the data markers that label a student “proficient” or not – were aligned to an entirely different test!

In recent years, Wisconsin's standards in various subjects were updated to better reflect what students should know and be able to do in the classroom at a given point in time. This meant the Forward Exam needed to be updated to accurately assess students on those learning goals, and that a standard setting was required to take place. That allowed us, for the first time, to also create a distinct year-over-year comparable student score for the subject of reading – a big step forward in supporting our bipartisan work on early literacy.

As state superintendent, I wanted to be sure experts and professionals – specifically classroom teachers – helped us address these alignment challenges. So, this past summer, my agency, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, convened a group of 88 Wisconsin educators representing communities across the state, and different perspectives from various education sectors, to review and update our measures. Their goal was to make sure we more accurately reflect where students perform academically *and* to align the standards to what's tested on our Wisconsin assessment. These changes make test results clearer and easier to understand for families like yours and mine.

I also want to offer some historical context. To fully understand how we got here, we need to go back more than a decade to when Wisconsin joined several states in aligning our test cut scores to the

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National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam. Proficiency levels on this national test are considered an extremely high standard to meet, *beyond* grade-level knowledge. Overnight, NAEP's cut scores made it falsely appear as if the number of students proficient in reading and math [decreased by 30 percent](#). This misalignment is exactly what we needed to change.

If standards are the units of measurement, the test is our tape measure. Until last year, we were teaching in pounds and measuring in miles. Our Wisconsin standards are grade level, so our Forward Exam performance levels should reflect where kids are on Wisconsin standards.

So let me be blunt: we are not lowering our standards; rather, we are reflecting actual student results using Wisconsin's strong academic standards.

I am proud of the work our state's educators did to align our test with Wisconsin's Academic Standards and provide families with results that better reflect what our students should know at each grade. In the coming years, these updates will provide our schools with better data as we work collectively to improve outcomes among students across our state.

In the end, it is not solely about numbers on a test: it's about giving our kids a clear path to success. By realigning proficiency levels to our state standards, we're not only improving the clarity of test results, but also reaffirming our commitment to educational excellence.

As parents, we deserve to understand how our kids are doing and what they need to thrive. With these updates, we can have more meaningful assessment conversations around the dinner table – ones rooted in honesty and transparency.

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