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 Education

State student testing data a mixed bag

Declines seen in some areas

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An annual analysis of school performance statewide and by district in southeastern Wisconsin presents good or bad news, depending on how you interpret findings released Thursday by the Public Policy Forum.

The gap in state test scores has narrowed slightly between the 50 school districts in southeastern Wisconsin and the rest of the state, but that's mostly because the rest of the state posted a big decline in certain categories such as reading. That allowed the region - which posted a smaller decline in reading achievement - to catch up a bit.

That's one of several findings included in Public Schooling in Southeastern Wisconsin: 2009-'10, the [Forum's latest report](#).

The nonprofit has analyzed district-by-district data from the 2009-'10 school year - such as revenue, expenditures, performance data, enrollment, attendance, ACT scores and free- and reduced-price lunch rates - annually for 24 years.

Highlights from the analysis include:

- A statewide 2.2 percentage point decrease in reading proficiency for 2009-'10 eighth-graders compared with the proficiency rate for 2008-'09 seventh-graders. Among the 50 districts in the seven-county southeastern Wisconsin region, the corresponding decrease was only 0.5 percentage points.
- A significant increase in the amount of children eligible for free- and reduced-price lunches in the region (5.6 percentage points) and the rest of the state (5.9 percentage points). By comparison, the increase for the Milwaukee area between the 2007-'08 and 2008-'09 school years was 0.3 percentage points.
- A consistent gender gap in reading in both the region and the state. Girls outperformed boys in reading at every level, though less so by high school.
- A large persistent racial achievement gap in reading and math for both the region and the state.

Public Policy Forum President Rob Henken said the annual report provides a regional perspective on education, and it allows district leaders to pick apart their data and compare it to other districts in terms of test scores, expenditures and revenue.

"It's in the eye of the beholder whether it's good or bad news, but the (Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination) reading scores from the cohort we've been following for five years saw a decline slightly from students going from seventh to eighth grade," Henken said. "The rest of the state declined a little more rapidly. We're not seeing the type of big improvement that's necessary."

Rising poverty

Anneliese Dickman, research director at the Forum, said more children statewide are qualifying for free- and reduced-price lunches. Also, more minority students are enrolling in districts.

"Those kinds of trends bode poorly for test scores unless we intervene," she said.

Although the total enrollment in the region was about the same as last year, minority enrollment grew by 39%.

Dickman also said the analysis shows the region is falling behind the state on graduation rates. And that's not just because of Milwaukee Public Schools, which heavily influences the regional data.

In addition to MPS, five other districts in the region had graduation rates that were lower than the state average, Henken said.

"Usually, if you don't include MPS and Racine, the regional average is better than the state average," Dickman said.

Dickman said the Forum undertook a gender analysis in reading and math performance because, nationally, reports have shown that girls are pulling ahead of boys in certain subjects. The same pattern emerged in Wisconsin in reading.

"I was shocked at how consistent it is," she said. "In districts where there is a gap between boys and girls in reading, it persists across all grade levels."

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