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Education

## State's black fourth-graders post worst reading scores in U.S.



Tom Lynn

**Fifth-grader Tyja Hall (left), 11, and fourth-grader Mekenzy Brown, 9, read together Wednesday at Maryland Avenue Montessori School in Milwaukee. Principal Phillip Dosmann said MPS' four Montessori schools have found a way to create change locally. He credited the schools' approach of starting with phonetic-based reading instruction at age 3 and the role of parents in the success of Montessori students.**

### Overall, state's 4th-graders losing ground, 8th-graders beat

## average

By [Amy Hetzner](#) of the Journal Sentinel

Posted: March 24, 2010 | [\(189\) Comments](#)

Reading scores for Wisconsin's African-American fourth-graders trail those of their racial peers in every other state and the District of Columbia, according to a national government report that delivered dire news Wednesday about how Wisconsin prepares its students.

Further, fourth-graders as a whole in Wisconsin are losing ground in reading while other states make gains, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, also known as the nation's report card. Only 33% of the state's fourth-graders scored at a level considered proficient or advanced by the test; the rest scored at a basic level or lower.

Reading results for Wisconsin's eighth-grade students, the other grade that took the reading test, were somewhat more promising.

Wisconsin's eighth-graders matched their highest score of the last decade. Even so, only 34% of Wisconsin's eighth-graders were considered proficient in reading.

However, the average score for African-American eighth-graders was the same as that for three other states and higher only than the average from black students in Arkansas. The average score for black Wisconsin eighth-graders was even below the average score for the state's eighth-grade English language learners. In other words, black students scored poorer in reading than students for whom English is not their native-born language.

"It's an outrage," said Howard Fuller, former Milwaukee Public Schools superintendent, voucher advocate and head of the Institute for the Transformation of Learning at Marquette University, in response to the latest scores. "And the thing that angers me more is that there is no widespread outrage. We get these statistics, and people mutter the normal this and that, but then everyone goes back to whatever they were doing."

Fuller added: "These are not the children that we all care about. Because if we did, we wouldn't continue to allow this to happen year after year."

The 500-point reading tests were administered to 4,088 fourth-graders in a sample of Wisconsin's schools between January and March 2009. Fifteen years ago, in 1994, Wisconsin fourth-graders posted an average score of 224, which exceeded the national average by 12 points. This time around, Wisconsin fourth-graders posted an average score of 220, and the national average has risen to the same level.

At the eighth-grade level, Wisconsin scored an average of 266, beating the national average by four points.

The percentage of Wisconsin students whose household incomes are low enough to qualify them for free and reduced-price lunches has increased in recent years, reaching 39% for the current school year from 29.5% in 2003-'04.

"Despite increasing poverty that has a negative impact on student learning, we must do more to improve the reading achievement of all students in Wisconsin," state schools Superintendent Tony Evers said.

Although the NAEP results did show that student poverty correlated with lower reading scores, a greater factor was whether a student was African-American.

Only 9% of African-American fourth-graders performed at a level considered proficient. The same percentage of the state's eighth-grade black students tested at a proficient level.

State Sen. Luther Olsen (R-Ripon), a member of the state Senate Education Committee, called the scores for Wisconsin's black students "atrocious."

"It's about time the adults in Milwaukee and the state start to take this thing seriously because we can't continue to have another generation of boys and girls fail like this again," Olsen said. "This is the future of Milwaukee and our state, and we've got to step up and make some serious changes."

In contrast, reading proficiency rates for black students in Connecticut, for example, rose from 12% in 2003 to 22% in 2009, noted The Education Trust, a Washington, D.C.-based group that argues for educational equity.

"Progress is coming neither fast enough nor vast enough," Amy Wilkins, vice president of the group, said in a statement. "But our most improved states show that when we concentrate on ratcheting up instruction and expectations for all students, we effect real change."

State Sen. Lena Taylor (D-Milwaukee) added that generations of hopelessness and low expectations among black families in Wisconsin - especially in Milwaukee - have resulted in an education crisis that Wisconsinites must band together to solve.

"We created this, and we have to put our hands on this to start making a difference," Taylor said. "We have to start with reading. If you can't read, you can't do anything."

### **Pockets of success**

Phillip Dosmann, principal of Craig and Maryland Avenue Montessori schools in Milwaukee, said MPS' four Montessori schools have found a way to effect change locally, and African-American students scored above not only the district average, but the state average for black students on all subject areas of the state's standardized assessments last school year.

He credited the schools' approach of starting with phonetic-based reading instruction at age 3, infusing reading in every subject area and keeping students with their teachers for three-year cycles.

Parents also play a big role, Dosmann said.

"Parents are helpful in terms of following up with homework and reading with their children and enriching their children's lives through different experiences," he said.

Although the standard for rating a child proficient is more generous on the state assessment than on the national assessment, the numbers at Craig and Maryland are telling. At Craig, 71.5% of all fourth-graders - not just African-Americans - scored proficient or advanced in reading on the state assessment in 2005; it was up to 75% by 2008. At Maryland, 62.3% scored at least proficient in reading in 2005; it was up to 70% by 2008. For MPS as a whole, the scores were 62.3% in 2005 and 61.2% in 2008.

At the state level, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction has been working to institute new,

higher-level English standards and expand a program that targets intervention programs to struggling students in the early grades, two efforts that state officials cited as crucial to improving students' reading performance.

"We can't wait for kids to fail," deputy state schools superintendent Mike Thompson said. "We have to identify problems very early. And that is systematic change."

Furthermore, Thompson said the achievement gap between black and white students is one that all districts in the state have to work to solve, not just MPS.

"We have achievement gaps in other districts that have large populations of color," he said. "It's not a problem that we have to target in Milwaukee, we have to target it across the state."

Mary Bell, president of the state's largest teachers union, the Wisconsin Education Association Council, called in a statement for a "comprehensive solution," including "adequate funding targeted to where it's needed most and shared responsibility between parents, educators, legislators and the general public in supporting our schools."

*Erin Richards of the Journal Sentinel staff contributed to this report.*

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#### 1. [TDupuis - Mar 24, 2010 9:23 AM](#)

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14

What a scathing abomination! Many are to blame - parents, teachers, administrators, lack of gainful employment, and segregation in SE WI.

#### 2. [CCSWaukesha - Mar 24, 2010 9:31 AM](#)

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This is 100% due to parents.

#### 3. [vinceinwaukesha - Mar 24, 2010 9:33 AM](#)

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"lack of gainful employment" for fourth graders? Even eighth graders can't work unless they flunk a few times.

#### 4. [love HS sports - Mar 24, 2010 9:39 AM](#)

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67

Did you mean to say "Obamanation" instead of abomination?

I wish I could fail in my job and blame my customer....

Just wait, Obama will be taking over education soon, he will fix it all up for us.

5. [Tinidril - Mar 24, 2010 9:39 AM](#)

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31

Learning to read is not complicated. It may be monotonous at first (for the teacher), but it certainly isn't complicated.

Modern curricula companies have a vested interest in making it complicated and requiring lots of flashy do-dads that cost the system lots of money.

The only thing required to learn to read is a phonics book. I recommend Phonics Pathways.  
<http://www.amazon.com/Phonics-Pathways-Reading-Perfect-Spelling/dp/0787979104>

A strong phonics program began in K5 will have a child reading c-v-c words in less than a month. Within a year, they will be reading easy chapter books. Within two years, they will be reading full length, no picture chapter books.

Of course, the companies don't make as much money then.

Let's see ... a \$20 phonics book that has a child reading fluently in two years or a fancy, complicated multi-year program that costs \$200+ per student per year for multiple years and requires reading "specialists" to teach it, yet still ends up with failing students.... hmmm.

6. [my2cents - Mar 24, 2010 9:41 AM](#)

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TDupuis:Don't give me the segregation bologna. I suggest you contact some of the school districts that offer the Chapter 220 program and find out how those students tested compared to the non 220 students in the districts before you blame segregation. They are offered the same education by the same teachers, but please find out the comparison scores and I think you'd have to delete that as one of the things to blame.

7. [DaVoiceofReason - Mar 24, 2010 9:48 AM](#)

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06

I blame this on Bush & Walker

8. [BettyV - Mar 24, 2010 10:00 AM](#)

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[10](#)

10

OMG - how can our fourth graders be doing so bad? If you can't read, then you can't do anything - no math, no history, no geography, no job in your future. We read to our kids from the time they were babies and they all knew their letters by the time they went to kindergarten. Many of these kids were probably in day care or possibly in some government subsidized program, such as Head Start, before they started school. Why do they wait until they are in fourth grade before realizing the kids can't read. Where, might I ask, are the parents? Are the teachers contacting the parents to let them know their child is behind? Can they even find the parents - do the parents care?

If you can't read, you have absolutely no future. Everything in life revolves around the ability to read. Unemployment for these kids as they reach that point in their lives is guaranteed.

9. [mediajim - Mar 24, 2010 10:04 AM](#)

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tinidril

I could not have said it better myself. The public teaching system is always looking for "new and better ways" to teach. If you track these "new and better ways", just follow the money of government funded programs. It is not about the good of the students anymore, it is all about making sure the school districts get their share of the big pot of government money.

10. [TheWraith - Mar 24, 2010 10:06 AM](#)

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I am amazed when I visit friends and they don't have any books for their kids to read. I love to read and I love reading with my kids (9-7-3). If your child cannot read that is a particular slam on you as a parent. I can see your kid not knowing physics and you being unable to help because you don't understand it either, but damn, you should be able to help teach your kid to read and if they cannot you should be working with them until they can. How in the heck can they do anything if they cannot read/comprehend!

11. [mke jim - Mar 24, 2010 10:12 AM](#)

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I agree with all of you. The thing we must do now is figure out who to blame!

12. [Bored Diva Online - Mar 24, 2010 10:15 AM](#)

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This is not good! There is not only one person to blame! The teachers can't do everything by themselves, and the parents can't either. It takes everyone to work together with these children. Speaking as a parent of a fourth grader, my child has never gotten a report card, with a grade lower than a "B".....She's an excellent reader, and her school works with all children that are in danger of falling behind. I'm not sure how public schools handle their process....

13. [Far Right - Mar 24, 2010 10:16 AM](#)

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11

@DAVOICEOFFREASON.... How can you blame Walker when he has no control over Wisconsin or even Milwaukee school. Also, typical liberal comment with "blame Bush". When will that end? Some day you will realize that Bush did a lot of great things as President.

14. [mediajim - Mar 24, 2010 10:18 AM](#)[» Report abuse](#)[01](#)

01

thewraith,

you cannot teach something when you do not know it yourself, or you, as a parent, have not been properly taught how to read. The errors of our school system are not just today, but from the past generation as well. It is that simple.

The opportunity for private schools and private e-learning environments is going to be huge over the next decade as our public school system collapses, due to the power of the teachers union and its inability to recognize their system is in complete financial distress and will continue to get worse. The gravy train of salary and great benefits cannot continue. Being able to retire in their mid 50's with full benefits is not sustainable.

15. [Saint Viper - Mar 24, 2010 10:27 AM](#)[» Report abuse](#)[20](#)

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34% of students are proficient. Like they say, if a foreign country imposed these kinds of results on us, it would be an act of war.

Can't wait till we turn healthcare over to these same people. (Sorry, can't resist getting a healthcare dig in there.)

16. [YesWeCan - Mar 24, 2010 10:27 AM](#)[» Report abuse](#)[07](#)

07

This just shows that greedy republicans will ruin everything if given any sort of government power. When the well educated Democrats take full control this will get better.

17. [mediajim - Mar 24, 2010 10:28 AM](#)[» Report abuse](#)[00](#)

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Hey bored diva

My kid goes to a public school and has never gotten anything less than a b+ on their report card. So there!! I am not sure how private schools handle their process...

I really don't have a kid in a public school, but this, "better than someone else attitude" is a big reason for some of our failures. People like you just don't get it and never will.

18. [rational - Mar 24, 2010 10:29 AM](#)

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Parents Parents Parents Parents. Or lack of. The fact that Milwaukee has the highest teenage pregnancy rates among black teens and teens in general is one factor, second is the high rate of black under education. This is a circle of life that is just going to get worse. You might as well live in a third world country the way its going. Dont bother traveling to see the third world its right on your doorstep Milwaukee. Time to put some parental accountability in place and incentives or disincentives. How about you want goverment assistance then your child must peform. Money and handouts seem to be only carrot and stick here to sovlve the problem. No common sense will do.

19. [jobee - Mar 24, 2010 10:34 AM](#)

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Why don't we stop blaming this on teachers and teaching methods and point to the real problem. You know, the one that everyone knows about, but is afraid to say?

Spend some time in these schools and you will see exactly what the problem is. These kids have absolutely no hope at home, absentee parents or no parental guidance at all and their behavior reflects it. But yet the parent (yes I said parent) cries the blues about not having anything, but continues to repeat the same stupid behavior time and time again and continues to bring more children into the same situation which costs everyone money either now or in the future.

Hillary Clinton said "It takes a community to raise a child" I say B.S! It takes TWO PARENTS! If you can't afford to support and guide them, don't have them! Our future depends on it.

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