



Wisconsin scores high on test, but racial disparities continue

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

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With the highest percent of students taking the ACT in state history, Wisconsin's Class of 2011 posted an average score slightly above that from the previous year's graduates and maintained the state's third-place ranking among states in which the test is widespread.

Seventy-one percent of the 2011 graduates from Wisconsin private and public schools took the college admissions test, averaging a 22.2 composite score on the 36-point test, according to information to be publicly released Wednesday. The nationwide average was 21.1 on the ACT Assessment, which includes tests in English, reading, mathematics and science.

State schools superintendent Tony Evers credited the results to more high school students pursuing more demanding coursework.

"The message of using high school as preparation for college and careers is taking hold with our students," Evers said in a news release. "Nearly three-quarters of our kids said they took the rigorous classes recommended for college entry, up from just over half five years ago."

Even so, ACT reported that only 32% of Wisconsin's recently graduated seniors had test results that showed they were ready for college-level courses in all four areas. Results for individual subjects ranged from 39% readiness in science to 75% in English.

Racial disparities also remained a problem in the state for the Class of 2011. The average composite score for black students was nearly seven points below that of white students - 16.2 compared with 23.1. Nationwide, the difference between the two groups was 5.4 points.

The percentage of 2011 graduates prepared for college-level core subject areas also varied greatly by race, with 36% of white students in Wisconsin considered ready for college classes compared with only 4% of black students.

Some of those differences were evident in the results posted by different school districts, as were differences between districts serving urban and suburban areas.

In Milwaukee Public Schools, where all students now take the test during their junior year of high school, the predominantly minority school system's average composite score was 16. That was an increase from 15.8 the year before, with scores improving in three of the four subject areas tested.

Meanwhile, students in the wealthier, suburban Whitefish Bay School District averaged 26.6 on the ACT, with about 90% of the class of 2011 taking the test.

His students' results stunned even Whitefish Bay High School Principal Bill Henkle. The school's ACT composite average in recent years has routinely been above 25 and has only exceeded 26 one other time.

"It's just mind-boggling," Henkle said. "It's a credit to their kids, to their families, to the community at large - I mean, all that factors into it - to our staff."

Among the 27 states where at least 50% of graduates take the ACT, Wisconsin's overall average score placed it behind only Minnesota and Iowa, which had composite scores of 22.9 and 22.3, respectively.

As more students take college admissions exams, average scores for states and schools tend to decline because of the inclusion of more students who may not have taken or done well in classes that contribute to college preparation.

To inspire more students to take such classes and enroll in college, however, some states have made the ACT mandatory. Eight states whose results were released had 100% participation on the test, but none of those states performed better than the national average.

Changes sought

Some school leaders in Wisconsin also have called for replacing the state's current high school test with the ACT or an exam similar to it.

Pewaukee High School Principal Marty Van Hulle is among those who would like to see such a change. His school already has about 80% of its students taking the ACT, with a composite average that has remained at 23.1 for three years in a row.

"We've got a high number and that's the number that parents care about," Van Hulle said.

2011 ACT scores

Here is a sampling of average composite ACT scores in area school districts:

Arrowhead 24.7

Elmbrook 25.2

Franklin 23

Germantown 23.4

Greenfield 21.1

Hamilton 23.6

Hartford Union 23.1

Kettle Moraine 23.8

Menomonee Falls 23.1

Mequon-Thiensville 25.6

MPS 16

Mukwonago 23.4

Muskego-Norway 23.9

Oconomowoc 22.4

Pewaukee 23.1

Slinger 23.6

South Milwaukee 21.4

Wauwatosa 23.8

Whitefish Bay 26.6

Whitnall 23.2

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