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Annual report on region's public schools shows gap narrows slightly with rest of state

Lower state scores as much a contributor as improved scores in the region

MILWAUKEE, Wisconsin – *Thursday, September 2, 2010* – As the new school year commences for most of the region's public school districts, the Public Policy Forum's annual analysis of data on southeastern Wisconsin's public schools finds mixed results on the student achievement front. While the gap on test scores has narrowed slightly between the region's schools and schools statewide, other indicators show there is much progress to be made.

"We have been monitoring the region's student performance as compared to the rest of the state for many years," says Forum President Rob Henken. "This year's analysis, like many of our previous reports, indicates cause for concern, though certain results look better from the perspective of the citizens of southeast Wisconsin because of disappointing results for the state as a whole."

The report finds, for example, a statewide 2.2 percentage point decrease in the reading proficiency rate for this year's 8th graders compared to the proficiency rate for last year's 7th

graders. The corresponding change among the southeast Wisconsin districts was a much smaller .5 percentage point decrease in proficiency. “Typically, the reading proficiency rate drops from 7th to 8th grade,” explains Henken. “This year the region was able to virtually hold steady while the state’s rate declined more dramatically.”

While the report concludes that the regional performance gap has narrowed in reading, math, and science test scores at almost every grade level, the regional graduation rate is nearly five percentage points behind the statewide rate.

“When it comes to graduation rates, the state is pulling away from the region,” says Henken.

“The graduation gap is attributable mostly to the low graduation rate in the Milwaukee Public Schools, but five other southeast Wisconsin districts are below the statewide graduation rate, as well.”

Other findings from the report include:

- A consistent gender achievement gap in reading for both the region and the state. Girls outperform boys in reading at every grade level; the gender gap is larger in elementary and middle grades and is narrower in high school. There is not a similar gender gap in math.
- A large and persistent racial achievement gap in reading and math for both the state and the region. The region’s racial gap is larger than the state’s in both subjects at nearly all grade levels.

- A significant increase in participation in the free or reduced-price lunch program in both the region and the state as a whole. Almost all of the region's districts saw some growth in the lunch program for low-income students.

The Forum's schools report was funded by Multiple Listing Service, Northwestern Mutual Foundation, Alverno College, Southeastern Wisconsin Schools Alliance, Stifel Nicolaus, and Waukesha County Technical College. A copy can be downloaded at the Forum's web site, www.publicpolicyforum.org

Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum, established in 1913 as a local government watchdog, is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to enhancing the effectiveness of government and the development of southeastern Wisconsin through objective research of public policy issues.

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