

Reading Scores

CAN WISCONSIN CATCH MISSISSIPPI?

The 2025–27 state budget provided funding for many critical state and local government services and lowered taxes for most Wisconsinites. The press coverage reflects that. However, one important item that seems to be lost in much of the coverage is the full funding of a 2023 bill that changes Wisconsin’s approach to early reading instruction. The state’s new approach follows the framework implemented by Florida in the early 2000s and adopted by Mississippi in 2013, resulting in what is frequently called the “Mississippi Miracle.”

► National reading scores

Each state has its own testing for student proficiency in reading. Because the tests differ, they don’t allow for state-by-state comparisons. The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) testing allows for these comparisons, letting educational leaders and the public know how our students are faring versus others around the nation. Fourth- and eighth-grade reading are among several subjects tested every two years by NAEP.

In 1998, Wisconsin ranked fifth among 39 participating states for fourth-grade NAEP reading scores. Since 2003, Wisconsin’s scores have tracked the median state score for the nation (see chart). Test scores were essentially flat through 2015 and have declined since. On the 11 tests during this period, Wisconsin’s national rank fluctuated between 21st and 33rd.

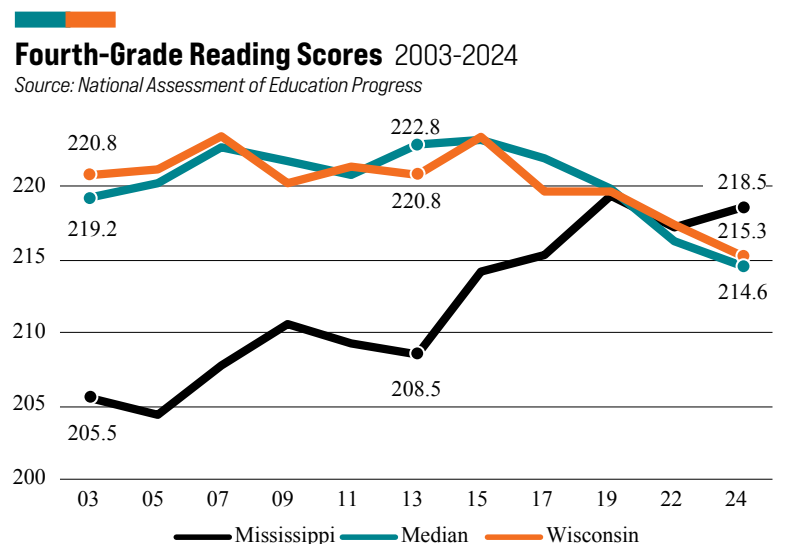
The Mississippi story is much different. From 2003 through 2013, Mississippi’s fourth-grade reading scores were among the worst in the nation despite rising test scores. Over those 10 years, the state’s score rose from 205.5 to 208.5. However, since most states made gains

as well, Mississippi’s rank declined from 48th in 2003 to 49th in 2013.

After 2013, Mississippi’s reading scores continued to rise, but at a faster pace. In 2019, they reached 219.3, for a gain of nearly 11 points (5.2%) over six years (see chart). The increase was the best in the nation, more than doubling second-place South Dakota’s 4.1-point (1.9%) gain. During that period, 38 states saw declines, including Wisconsin’s small 1.1-point drop.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent effects likely contributed to reading score declines in 48 states between 2019 and 2024.¹ While Mississippi experienced a decline during this period, its 0.8-point drop was the smallest in the nation. Wisconsin’s 4.4-point drop was the 16th smallest.

From 2013 to 2024, Mississippi’s test scores rose 10 points, the largest gain in the nation and nearly double second-place Louisiana’s 5.5-point increase.



Just as impressive was the breadth of the gains. NAEP reports scores at the various performance percentiles (10th, 25th, 50th, 75th, and 90th). The 10th percentile is the score at which 10% of students scored lower, while the 90th is the score at which 90% of students scored lower. Mississippi students gained between nine and 11 points across all percentiles.

This is a sharp contrast to the overriding experience. Most states saw small gains or losses at the 90th percentile and double-digit losses at the 10th percentile. Wisconsin's scores in the 90th percentile declined by one point. They dropped 13 points at the 10th percentile and eight points at the 25th.

► Mississippi policy changes

The unexpected and surprising gains in Mississippi were due largely to major changes in how the state and its public schools approached reading instruction. In 2013, Mississippi passed the Literacy-Based Promotion Act, which was based partly on Florida's 2002 reform of its approach to grade school reading. Following its changes, Florida's fourth-grade reading scores climbed significantly, moving into the top 10 in 2009 and remaining there in all but one year since.

The Mississippi reforms had three primary components. First, the state began providing statewide teacher training in science-based reading instruction and intervention. The program emphasizes phonics, vocabulary, reading fluency, and comprehension.

Second, the law requires schools to administer screenings to help educators identify, at an early age, students who struggle with reading. Those with significant deficiencies are provided immediate reading instruction and intervention. In addition, parents or guardians must be notified and provided with a description of the additional instructional support to be provided to the student as well as strategies to use to help the student succeed in reading proficiency.

Finally, beginning with the 2014–15 school year, third graders who score in the lowest achievement level on the state's third-grade reading test must repeat that grade. The law provides several "good cause" exemptions to this requirement.

Mississippi is not the only state with this type of policy. In 2024, 13 states had a retention policy that required third-grade students to be held back if they were not reading at a specified level. Another 13 allow local school districts to implement a retention policy. That said, this component of the reforms is the most controversial.

The research on retention policies is mixed. Some studies



find benefits early on, with the effects fading in later grades. Others show harmful effects, such as an increased likelihood of dropping out in high school.

At the same time, not all retention policies are the same. According to the Education Commission of the States in a review of retention studies, "While the research is mixed, a through line in the findings suggests that additional academic supports play a strong role in positive outcomes."

► Wisconsin 2023 Act 20

In July 2023, Gov. Tony Evers signed Wisconsin Act 20, which incorporated many of the Mississippi reforms. It requires:

1. Science-based literacy instruction, which includes phonological awareness, phonics, building background knowledge, oral language development, vocabulary building, instruction in writing, instruction in comprehension, and reading fluency
2. Training in science-based literacy instruction for kindergarten through third-grade teachers and reading specialists
3. Multiple diagnostic assessments/screenings for students in four-year-old kindergarten through third grade
4. Parental/family notification of the assessment/screening results
5. A personal reading plan for at-risk students

The original legislation had a retention policy for third-grade students unable to pass a reading assessment. That policy was dropped, though these students must receive intensive reading instruction in fourth grade until they achieve the goals set out in their reading plan.

The legislation also funds up to 64 literacy coaches to support schools in developing expertise in providing science-based literacy instruction.

► Looking ahead

Research shows that grade school reading proficiency is correlated with future school success, including high school graduation. Students who are not proficient in reading in early grades are also more likely to experience attendance and behavioral issues.

Time will tell how effective these reforms will be in Wisconsin. However, the experience of many states adopting similar reforms is encouraging. ■

Forward Analytics is a Wisconsin-based research organization that provides state and local policymakers with nonpartisan analysis of issues affecting the state.

1. Due to the pandemic, the 2021 assessments were moved to 2022 and are now done in even-numbered years.