

# Reading gap is nation's worst

Average score of state's black students ranks lowest

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The average reading ability for fourth- and eighth-grade black students in Wisconsin is the lowest of any state, and the reading achievement gap between black students and white students in Wisconsin continues to be the worst in the nation.

Those are among the facts found in a mass of testing results released Tuesday by the U.S. Department of Education, the latest results from a long-standing federal program called the National Assessment of Education Progress. It is the closest thing to a nationwide standardized testing program for reading and math ability.

The gap between blacks and whites was worse in Wisconsin than, say, Louisiana? Yes.

The average score for black fourth-graders in reading was lower than, say, Washington, D.C., or Alabama? Yes.

"I find it very distressing to look at this," said Elizabeth Burmaster, Wisconsin superintendent of public instruction. "There isn't anything more important (in education). This is the civil rights issue of our country."

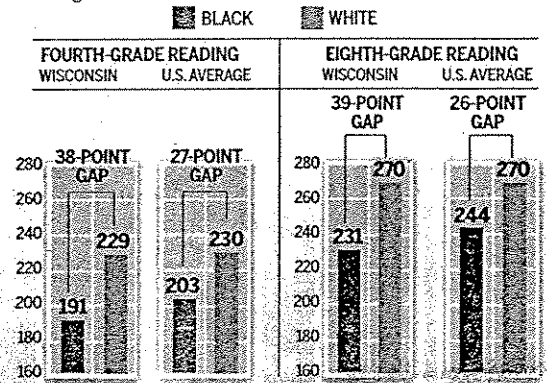
"It's upsetting to me," said William Andrekopoulos, superintendent of Milwaukee Public Schools. "This is the very reason why I've been talking about improving instruction over and over again."

Overall, Wisconsin students did better than the national average in all four sets

Please see **RESULTS, 9A**

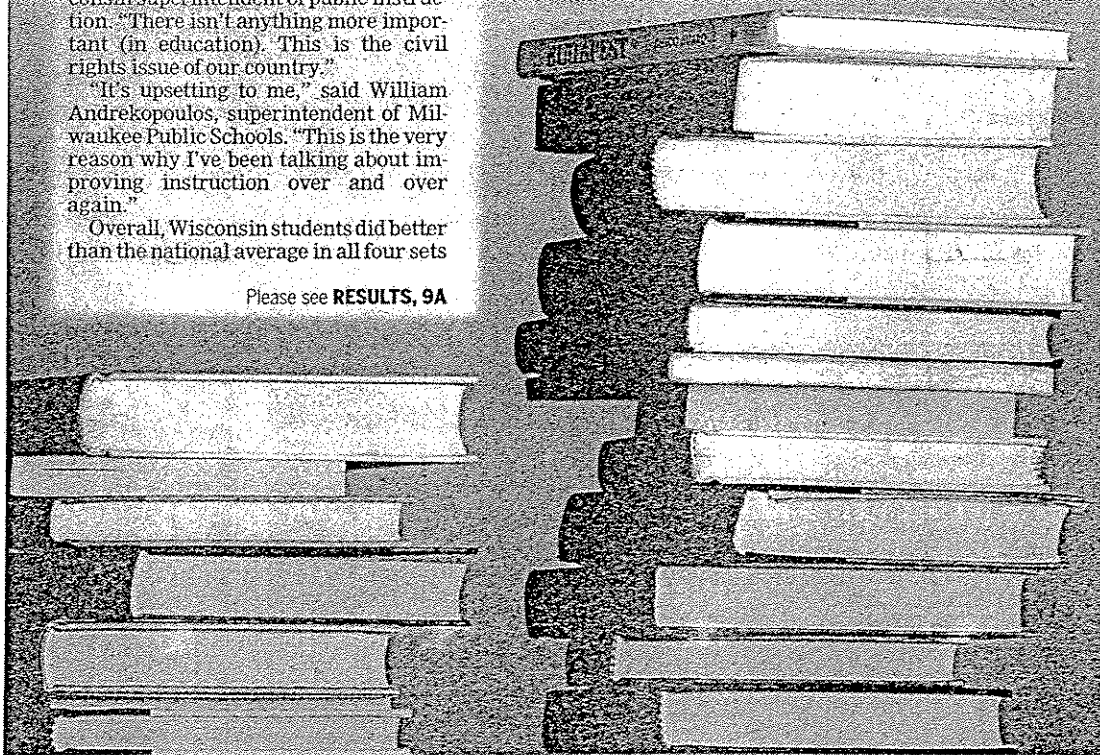
## Wisconsin's troubling disparity

State officials expressed dismay Tuesday at a national report showing that whites and blacks in Wisconsin are far apart in reading levels.



Source: National Center for Education Statistics

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**RESULTS**

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of results released in Washington: fourth-grade reading, fourth-grade math, eighth-grade reading and eighth-grade math. And compared with the last round of testing two years ago, the average scores in Wisconsin were up in three of those areas. Eighth-grade reading was the exception.

Nationwide, overall scores were up slightly in all four areas. U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings said the new data showed that the No Child Left Behind education law was working, and critics said the data didn't show much at all.

Some declines in eighth-grade reading results, both nationally and in Wisconsin, brought calls from education leaders for increased attention to getting middle school students to be capable and involved readers.

But the most dramatic results from the standpoint of Wisconsinites were the achievement gap figures, fresh evidence of the huge issues affecting the lives of African-Americans in Wisconsin, issues that include rising poverty, loss of blue-collar jobs, high rates of single-parent and teen-mother births, and severe crime.

White fourth-graders in Wisconsin had an average reading score of 229 on a scale of 1 to 500. Black students had an average score of 191. That 38-point gap was two points larger than the gap in Nebraska and three points larger than for Connecticut, the two states closest to Wisconsin on this measure. The national average for black students was 203.

The 191 score in Wisconsin was lower than the 192 in the District of Columbia and Tennessee, with every other state coming in higher.

For eighth-grade reading,

## How Wisconsin students did in reading and math

This chart shows the percentage of Wisconsin students who rated a "basic" ability in reading and math, and those who demonstrated the more advanced level of "proficient." "Low-income" students are those who qualified for free or reduced-price school lunches.

	FOURTH GRADE						EIGHTH GRADE					
	READING			MATH			READING			MATH		
	'05	'07	CHANGE	'05	'07	CHANGE	'05	'07	CHANGE	'05	'07	CHANGE
Overall, basic or better	67	70	3	84	85	1	76	77	1	76	80	4
proficient or better	33	35	2	40	47	7	34	34	0	36	36	0
White, basic or better	74	77	3	91	92	1	82	82	0	84	83	-1
proficient or better	38	41	3	48	54	6	40	38	-2	42	42	0
Black, basic or better	34	35	1	46	47	1	44	40	-4	30	30	0
proficient or better	10	11	1	7	11	4	9	8	-1	5	6	1
Hispanic, basic or better	49	50	1	66	69	3	57	58	1	56	59	3
proficient or better	20	17	-3	16	27	11	18	17	-1	16	18	2
Low income, basic or better	48	51	3	68	68	0	59	57	-2	54	56	2
proficient or better	16	18	2	19	25	6	19	16	-3	15	18	3
Non-low income, basic or better	77	80	3	92	94	2	83	84	1	84	84	0
proficient or better	42	44	2	51	58	7	40	40	0	43	45	2

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

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### Measuring the gap in reading

The performance of Wisconsin students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress generally improved in small increments between 2005 and 2007, except when it came to eighth-grade reading. This chart shows average scores on reading tests given in fourth and eighth grades, broken down into racial categories, among states with the largest racial gaps.

Fourth grade reading	SCALE SCORE		
	WHITE	BLACK	GAP
Wisconsin	229	191	38
Nebraska	230	194	36
Connecticut	238	203	35
Pennsylvania	233	200	33
Minnesota	231	198	33
Tennessee	224	192	32
Arkansas	226	195	31
Michigan	227	197	30
Massachusetts	241	211	30
U.S. average	230	203	27

Eighth grade reading	SCALE SCORE		
	WHITE	BLACK	GAP
Wisconsin	270	231	39
Michigan	267	236	31
Connecticut	276	246	30
U.S. average	270	244	26

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

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the gap in scores for Wisconsin was 39 points. Michigan, at 31 points, was the only other state over 30. The average score in Wisconsin for a black eighth-grader of 231 was five points lower — a wide margin in these scores — than the second-lowest score, Michigan's at 236.

For Hispanic students, the average fourth-grade score in Wisconsin was 208 and the average eighth-grade score was 247, meaning that in both cases there was a substantial gap, but it was not as severe as the black-white gap. The Hispanic-white gaps in Wisconsin were more in line with national averages.

The same was true for the differences between students who qualified for free and reduced-price lunch in school — the general definition of a low-income student — and students who did not qualify. The Wisconsin gaps were large, but generally in line with national patterns.

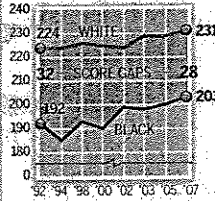
In fourth-grade math, the black-white gap was greater in Wisconsin than in any other state, but less than the gap in Washington, D.C., and the average score for black students was slightly above the scores in Nebraska and the District of Columbia.

For eighth-grade math, only Nebraska had a bigger gap

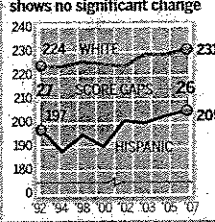
### Slightly smaller gap

Nationally, the new results show slight declines in most measures of achievement gaps. These figures for fourth-grade reading show changes in the gap since the national tests were given in 1992.

#### White-black gap narrows —



#### ... while white-Hispanic gap shows no significant change



Source: National Center for Education Statistics

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than Wisconsin — the District of Columbia wasn't listed because it has too few white eighth-graders to be calculated. The average score for black students in Wisconsin was slightly higher than the averages in Nebraska, Michigan, the District of Columbia and Alabama.

This is not the first time Wisconsin has had the largest black-white gaps in one or more of the areas tested. Much the same was true in 2003 and 2005, the last years in

## HOW SCHOOLS CLOSE THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

- Everyone in the school shares high expectations.
- There is a high-quality principal who is an effective instructional leader.
- Teachers are experienced and work on improving their skills.
- "Nothing about teaching and learning is left to chance."
- Student progress is assessed often, and struggling students get extra attention.
- The emphasis is on what students are learning, not what teachers are teaching.
- Teachers have planning time and feel valued.

Daria Hall, Education Trust

qualified teachers." Wendell Harris, chairman of the education committee of the Milwaukee chapter of the NAACP, said, "I know we've got to do better in school, there's no question about that."

But, he said, "really, from my standpoint, (it's) families. ... We can't keep making excuses for parents."

Harris said many parents live amid difficult circumstances, but "we have to do our best to try to get our children educated whatever our own circumstances are."

He added, "We have to become more willing to hold everyone accountable and not just the teachers."

Burnmaster said the high and rising level of poverty in Wisconsin was a big factor behind the gaps. She said she wanted to know whether other states had the same proportions of students from low-income homes as Wisconsin.

"It's not just an achievement gap," she said. "It's an economic gap. It's a gap in health. It's a quality of life gap. All of those things influence student achievement."

Andreopoulos has come to stress how teachers teach and what goes on in classrooms increasingly in his five years as superintendent of MPS. He said the key goal of a strategic plan for MPS approved by the School Board in July was better instruction, and MPS efforts in the last couple years have focused strongly on improving teaching, especially in low-performing schools.

He also said he hopes efforts to assure that the highest quality teachers are taking on the most challenging classrooms will show results, in part with changes in how teachers are hired and placed that will have to be part of a new contract with the teachers union.

"If you have quality instruction in the classroom, you're going to reduce the achievement gap," Andreopoulos said. "We have a lot more work to do, there's no question about that."

The national test is given in every state to samples of students regarded by experts as statistically reliable. Both public and private school students take part. About 350,000 students nationwide took this round of tests in early 2007. That included about 6% of fourth-graders and about 4% of eighth-graders in Wisconsin, Burnmaster said.

which comparable results were released.

Daria Hall, assistant director of K-12 policy for the Education Trust, an influential education advocacy group based in Washington, said some other states were reducing their achievement gaps significantly, while Wisconsin's results showed little change.

"Minnesota closed its gap by 10 points (in eighth-grade reading) from 1998 to 2007," she said. "In Wisconsin, the gap increased by four points."

She said that in fourth-grade reading, the gap in Texas went down 14 points over nine years. In Louisiana, it was 12, and in Oklahoma and New York it was 11. Wisconsin's gap narrowed by only three points.

"It's just a very strong signal to policy makers and to educators in Wisconsin that we need to get serious about supporting kids of color in the state, and a lot of that has to do with supporting MPS," Hall said.

The Education Trust had found that Wisconsin school districts with high minority enrollments have \$1,000 less to spend per student than the whitest districts in the state, she said, "so that means that we really need to look at how schools are funded," Hall said.

"We've also done analyses to show that in the highest minority schools in the state, there are far more novice teachers, teachers with less than five years of experience. We need to get serious about ensuring that kids of color have at least their fair share of

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zie statue from TV Land, a cable network that broadcasts reruns of vintage

image, she said. But Viacom, which owns the rights to

## ISRAEL WELCOMES NEWBORN