

# A Parent's Guide to Standards and Assessment

## An Overview for Parents of Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards and the Wisconsin Student Assessment System

Parents of school-age children find that some things have remained the same since they went to school and that some things have changed. In the last 20 years, schools have experienced many changes in "academic standards," "curriculum," and "assessment." What exactly do these terms mean? How are they connected? How can parents help children do well in school?

*In this brochure, the term "parent" also refers to the child's primary caregiver(s), such as grandparents or other adults who have primary responsibility for the child.*

### What Are Academic Standards?

A governor's appointed task force developed Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards to encourage a higher level of learning from all public school students. Task force members included legislators, educators, business people, and parents. The standards describe the skills children should have and the things they should know by the end of grades 4, 8, and 12.

Each subject a child learns about in school is divided into *content standards* that tell what students should know and be able to do. Each subject is also divided into *performance standards* that tell how students will show they meet the content standards.

Finally, a third type of standard—*proficiency standards* that tell how well students have learned the content—has been developed for the five subjects covered in statewide tests. Many parents are most interested in the proficiency standards because schools report these standards to parents. Proficiency standards exist for mathematics, science, social studies, reading, and language arts.

Model academic standards have also been developed for 14 other subjects not covered by the state tests: agricultural education, business education, dance education, environmental education, family and consumer education, foreign languages, health education, information and technology literacy, marketing education, music education, physical education, technology education, theatre education, and visual arts education.

A complete listing of standards for all subjects is available on the DPI Standards Home Page at <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/standards/> or by checking with your school principal.

### What is the Curriculum?

How do academic standards connect to the curriculum in your child's classroom? School boards may either adopt Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards or develop and adopt their own. Most school boards have adopted the model standards.

Teaching, learning, and testing ought to connect to the academic standards. Each day, classroom teachers refer to a plan, called a curriculum, which outlines what a child should learn day-to-day in the classroom. The curriculum consists of activities and lessons at each grade level, instructional materials, and teaching techniques. Every school year, children deepen their knowledge of a subject by learning new concepts based upon what they learned in the past.

Children learn differently. Some enjoy learning by reading or examining things. Others learn best by listening to someone speak. And some learn most when they can use their hands or bodies. A curriculum should use a number of ways to ensure that the learning styles and needs of all children in the classroom are met.

The curricula used in your child's classroom prepare your child to meet the standards. The standards define what children will learn at certain points in time and what performances are accepted as evidence that the child has learned.

Parents can get more specific information about the connections among the academic standards, the curriculum, and the tests in their school district from their children's teachers, the school principal, or the guidance counselor. The DPI website at <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/> also explains these connections.

Schools should welcome parents' questions about and interest in the curriculum, state standards, and tests. The stronger the home-school connection is at all levels, the more prepared children are to meet the standards.

## What is Assessment?

How is a Child's Learning Progress Measured?

Schools use many ways to assess, or measure, the progress of students: homework completion, class projects, portfolios, unit tests, and student effort. Another way to measure student progress statewide is with state tests. In Wisconsin, the state Department of Public Instruction develops and administers statewide examinations to measure children's learning in five subject areas:

1. reading
2. language arts
3. mathematics
4. science
5. social studies

The statewide tests that children take help improve teaching and learning. The tests are based on Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards, and results are reported in terms of proficiency standards. For example, a fourth-grade student's score on the statewide mathematics test will be reported in terms of the standards established for learning at fourth grade.

The DPI website at <http://www2.dpi.state.wi.us/wsas/default.asp> reports summaries of proficiency scores for all public schools statewide.

Schools are required to report test results to parents of students in fourth, eighth, and tenth grades. Children will take state tests, or tests developed by the school district, at school. Some students with special education needs may be able to take the state tests with accommodations or may participate in alternate assessments that meet goals described in their individual education plans. For more information on testing students with special needs, please see <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/oea/specneed.html>.

**Below is a list of the types of tests  
children will take at the appropriate grades:**

<b>Test</b>	<b>Grade(s)</b>
Wisconsin Reading Comprehension Test	3
Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations	4, 8, 10

The test scores will show how each child is doing in the tested areas. Although the state tests do a good job of measuring student achievement of the standards, one test cannot measure everything that children have learned. Instead, the state tests attempt to provide parents and teachers with an overall picture of areas that each child has learned well and those in which he or she may need to improve.

The tests measure a child's performance at one point in time and can be valuable tools in identifying areas of strength for each child and areas where additional help is needed. The tests also help schools measure the effectiveness of their curriculum and where to make changes, if needed.

## More About the Tests Children Will Take: The Wisconsin Student Assessment System (WSAS)

### Wisconsin Reading Comprehension Test

This test is taken by third graders over a three-week period each spring. The test is given in three sessions and is not timed. Most children finish each of the first two sessions in about an hour and the third session in about a half-hour. The purpose is to identify a child's reading level compared to statewide proficiency standards for third-grade children.

The test results are important because:

- ▶ Parents are informed about their child's reading comprehension skills, or how well children understand the material they read. Test scores will fall into one of four levels: advanced, proficient, basic, or minimal performance.
- ▶ Based on the scores, parents and teachers can decide whether additional instruction is needed. Teachers and other school staff can talk with parents about ideas for improving skills and learning at school and at home.
- ▶ School districts can judge how well their reading programs work and can change them, if needed.

### Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations

These tests are given statewide to students in the fourth, eighth, and tenth grades each year. The tests measure knowledge and skills in five subject areas: mathematics, science, social studies, reading, and language arts. Remember, there are 14 subject areas within Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards that are NOT directly covered by the state tests.

### Proficiency Levels

These levels indicate how well children have learned the knowledge and skills tested when compared to set standards. In Wisconsin, these standards are called proficiency standards. These proficiency levels were set by Wisconsin teachers, based solely upon what children should know and be able to do at each grade level. The proficiency levels were set as goals to which students and schools can aspire. Each proficiency level includes a range of scores. There are four proficiency levels:

1. **Advanced:** distinguished achievement. Student shows an in-depth understanding of academic knowledge and skills tested.
2. **Proficient:** student is competent in the important academic knowledge and skills tested.
3. **Basic:** student is somewhat competent in the academic knowledge and skills tested.
4. **Minimal performance:** student shows limited achievement in the academic knowledge and skills tested.

#### **A Great Tool for Parents: The WINSS Website**

One of the most useful tools for parents is the WINSS website. WINSS stands for Wisconsin Information Network for Successful Schools and can be found at <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/sig/index.html>. On this website, parents can find information on standards and assessment, continuous school improvement, and best practices. WINSS also includes a data analysis section with test results and other information about every school and district in Wisconsin. WINSS is constantly being updated, so search the site often.

## Testing, Grade Advancement, and High School Graduation

In October 1999, the Wisconsin legislature passed legislation affecting student testing, grade advancement, and high school graduation. For **grade advancement**, the legislation requires each school board to adopt written criteria for advancing students from fourth to fifth grade and from eighth to ninth grade. The board policy must include the student's score on the fourth- and eighth-grade state tests, the student's academic performance, the recommendations of teachers (which are to be based only on academic performance), and any other academic criteria specified by the school board.

Local school boards may use the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations or may adopt another examination. Parents may excuse their children from taking these tests in Grades 4, 8, and 10.

For high school graduation, the legislation requires each school board to develop a written policy specifying criteria for granting a high school diploma. Among other things, the criteria shall include the pupil's academic performance and the recommendations of teachers. Often, satisfaction of these criteria is documented through results of standards-based student assessment—either state assessment or classroom assessment.

Parents may contact the school principal, guidance counselor, or a member of their school board with questions about grade advancement or graduation policies.

## Changes to Anticipate

- ▶ Starting in the fall of 2005, schools will test students at more grade levels. The federal No Child Left Behind Act calls for annual state testing in reading and mathematics in grades 3 through 8 and once at the high school level. In Wisconsin, high school students will continue to be assessed in the tenth grade. More information for parents on the No Child Left Behind Act is available at <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/esea/topics.html>
- ▶ The new state tests will be called the WKCE-CRT, for Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations-Criterion-Referenced Test.
- ▶ “Criterion-referenced” means that student performance on the new tests will be reported in terms of criteria, or standards. Because these tests will be developed expressly for Wisconsin, they will fit our standards better than ever before. Teachers will be informed which standards will be tested at each grade level.
- ▶ Because the WKCE-CRT will only be for Wisconsin students, all reports will compare student performance against *Wisconsin* standards and to other *Wisconsin* students.
- ▶ There have been and will continue to be changes in test content, components, and presentation, to better align the tests to the standards, to curriculum and instruction, to federal legislation, and, most importantly, to the way students learn best. An example of such a change is the repeal of the High School Graduation Test (HSGT). Students and parents had been notified to expect the HSGT, but because of state budget constraints, the HSGT is no longer anticipated.

## What Parents Should Know About Assessment

- ▶ **The state tests will test students only on the content of the Model Academic Standards in four areas: language arts (including reading), mathematics, science, and social studies.**

Wisconsin's Model Academic Standards form the basis for the state tests. State law required school boards to adopt these standards, or local standards, by August 1, 1998, for at least reading and writing, geography and history, mathematics, and science. Ask if your school board has adopted the standards. Ask to review a copy.

► **The curriculum in your child’s school should help students meet or exceed the Model Academic Standards.**

Ask if the curriculum in your child’s school is up-to-date with the standards. Many schools have aligned their curriculum and their tests with the standards, completed in 1998. New federal testing requirements, however, will make more alignment necessary.

If you have questions about the curriculum used in your child’s school, contact your school principal. Many schools ask parents to serve on curriculum committees to represent families’ interests and to communicate to families the issues considered by the committee. Request that copies of Wisconsin’s Model Academic Standards and your school’s curriculum be made available in your public library, your community family center, or other places so community members can be aware of their content. Or, you may download a copy of the standards at <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/dpi/standards/>

► **You have the right to review the tests taken by your child after testing is completed.**

All school districts have copies of test booklets. Contact your school principal to review the tests.

► **If your child scores in a lower proficiency level, even in grade 4, you should be concerned.**

A low proficiency score in grade 4 is an early warning that your child may need help developing the knowledge and skills required for that grade. Talk to your child’s teacher to learn what skills and knowledge need additional work. Ask the teacher for learning ideas you can do at home or for strategies to improve study skills.

► **You can be a real force in motivating your school to help all students learn more and test better.**

Review your child’s proficiency scores, but also compare how well the students in your child’s school did on the state tests to other schools of its size and demographic makeup. View the School Proficiency Summary on the DPI website (<http://www2.dpi.state.wi.us/wsas/default.asp>) or ask your school principal or district administrator for a copy.

Work with your school’s parent group or your school principal to hold a forum for parents to learn more about your school curriculum and state testing. Invite parents to express their ideas about skills they want their child to possess and to talk about how families might partner with the school to increase learning.

► **You can be an advocate for your child and your school.**

Get involved in school improvement and policy making. Attend school board meetings. Volunteer to serve on task forces, committees, and in your child’s classroom. Encourage other parents to get involved, too. Your presence will help the school be more responsive to families’ natural desires to help their children learn.

► **You can help your child test better and learn confidently.**

Don’t wait for your child’s first set of test scores to take positive action. Set aside a few minutes each night to review homework with your child. If your child is having trouble understanding a concept or completing homework, talk to your child’s teachers about learning strategies you can use both in class and at home. Check out the U.S. Department of Education website at <http://ed.gov> for lots of learning resources and ideas for parents. Always feel free to talk to your child’s teachers about other learning strategies you can use at home.

**For more information** about academic standards, tests and examinations, open enrollment, family-community partnerships with schools, and many other topics, call the Department of Public Instruction toll-free at 1-800-441-4563. Or, to view your school’s test results, visit the WINSS website at <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/siq/index.html>. Click on “Data Analysis.”

## **A Note from the State Superintendent**

Dear Parents,

The long-term goal of the Wisconsin Student Assessment System (WSAS) is for all students to show they have mastered the skills and knowledge in the subject areas tested. Since parents will always be their children's most important teachers, it's a good idea to learn more about Wisconsin's testing system, so you can help your children get the most from their education.

Please talk with teachers about your child's progress in school. Teachers need to hear from you to help them do their jobs better.

Special thanks to my Parent Leadership Corps for their advice on this document.

Elizabeth Burmaster  
State Superintendent

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Please note: The information contained in this document is accurate at the time of publication. Because standards and assessment issues are continually being discussed in the Wisconsin Legislature and at the federal level, parents should be aware that changes may occur.

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