

WISCONSIN'S SCHOOLS - ONLY PRETTY GOOD

SUNNY SCHUBERT

When it comes to K-12 education, it's good to be from Wisconsin.

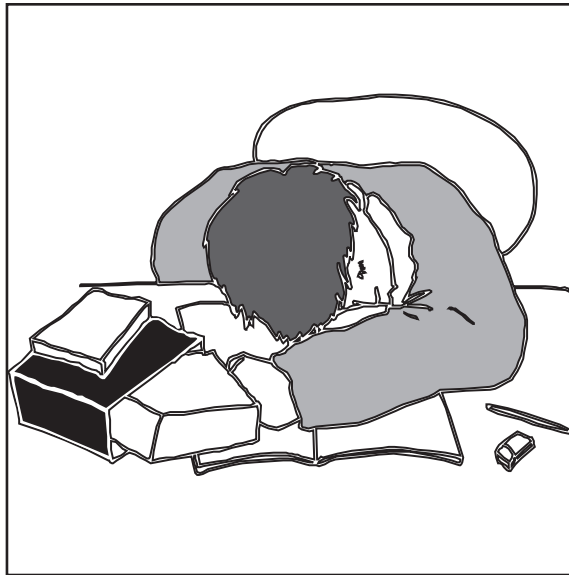
What's not to love about Wisconsin public schools? Year after year, Badger students post either the highest or the second-highest ACT scores in the nation. We've got National Merit Scholars out the wazoo. Governor James Doyle constantly touts the strength of our K-12 school system in trying to lure businesses here: Sure, our taxes may be high, but look what you're getting for your money!

Milwaukee? Oh yah hey, the Milwaukee public schools are a problem, but the rest of the state is doing just fine. Public opinion polls consistently show that while state residents are worried about what's going on in other schools and districts, they rate the schools their kids attend as good to excellent.

Except they're not.

In fact, saying Wisconsin schools are among the best in the nation is like winning the World's Ugliest Dog Contest: You may be on top of the pile, but it's a pretty ugly pile.

"Hmmp," you say. "What about the ACT scores? Isn't that proof that Wisconsin schools



are doing a good job?"

Not according to Dick Askey, a UW-Madison professor of mathematics who has campaigned for years—with little success—to reform Wisconsin's K-12 math curriculum.

"The fact is, Wisconsin schools do a pretty good job—not a great job, but pretty good—at educating those kids who are pretty smart

to begin with. And those are the kids who take the ACT," Askey says. "For the rest of our kids, and particularly for African-American kids. . . well, we've got some good private schools, but the public schools are in a shambles."

Terry Webb concurs. Webb is associate vice-president of learner success at Madison Area Technical College, a position that puts him in contact with a lot of high school graduates who are more representative of average students than those who score a 30 or more on the ACT.

"I'm not an expert on K-12 education," Webb says, "but from my point of view, the state's minimum requirements for graduation are not sufficient."

Sunny Schubert is a retired editorial writer for the Wisconsin State Journal.

"Some students are very well prepared to come here, or to any other college, and succeed. But a lot of others are not, and yet they hold the very same diplomas from the very same high schools," Webb says.

Howard Fuller is even more discouraged by claims of high quality K-12 education in Wisconsin. Fuller, a professor at Milwaukee's Marquette University and a former Milwaukee school superintendent, says bluntly "Our rhetoric doesn't match the reality."

"We have a two-fold problem in Wisconsin," says Fuller. "First, we are either not able or not willing to make sure that *all* kids get a good education, regardless of their race, or income level, or where they live."

"Second, even our best kids are behind internationally. And if they can't compete with students from Singapore or China or Germany, it's going to hurt our state and our nation in a global economy."

And the truth is, study after study puts American students far behind their counterparts in any number of nations—and some studies put Wisconsin kids behind those in other states.

The international picture is grim. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, in 2006, U.S. 15-year-olds tested below 29 other nations in science: Finland, Hong Kong, Canada, Taiwan, Estonia, Japan, New Zealand, Australia, Netherlands, Liechtenstein, Korea, Slovenia, Germany, England, Czech Republic, Switzerland, Macao, Austria, Belgium, Ireland, Hungary, Sweden, Poland, Denmark, France, Croatia, Iceland and Latvia.

Math was even worse, with U.S. students ranked 35th, ahead of just one nation: Italy.

On another test, the Third International Math & Science Survey of 21 Nations in 2003, U.S. students ranked 19th, ahead of only Cyprus and South Africa. No doubt the U.S. would have ranked even lower but Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and China declined to participate because they believed the test had been watered down.

As for how a Wisconsin K-12 education compares to other states, that depends on how success is measured and who is doing the measuring.

As might be expected, the governor, the state school superintendent and many local districts crank out press releases that "spin" testing data to make Wisconsin students come out on top. But Math professor Askey has another take. "Look at the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test," he says. Like any standardized test, NAEP "has problems," Askey says, "but it's better than almost all of the states' tests of academic progress."

The state test here is the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exam (WKCE) given to all state students in grades four, eight and ten. And its results paint a glowing picture of a state where almost all kids are advanced or proficient in every topic: 81 percent of fourth-graders scored advanced or proficient in reading in 2006; 77 percent in language, mathematics and science, and a whopping 91 percent in social studies.

But NAEP scores tell a different story, showing a 41 percent gap between student achievement on the NAEP test and the WKCE. That's ammunition for critics who charge the state tests sets the proficiency bar too low. The NAEP-WKCE gap is even worse for African-American students, says Askey. In 8th grade math, Wisconsin's black students tied for fourth-worst in the nation with Washington D.C. Even the highly-touted Madison school district doesn't do well by its students of color, scoring just one point above Milwaukee.

And the Department of Public Instruction's (DPI) willingness to fudge on certain provisions of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) earned Wisconsin the dubious honor of first place on the "Pangloss Index" developed by the Washington D.C.-based think tank, Education Sector. Pangloss, you may recall, was a character in Voltaire's "Candide" who insisted, despite all evidence to the contrary, that we live in the best of all possible worlds, a sort of educational utopia.

To be sure, everything DPI has done to manipulate the state's NCLB statistics is allowable under the law. But the net effect, says Education Sector's Kevin Carey, is that Wisconsin is able to use much more generous definitions of what constitutes "adequate yearly progress" than some other states. For instance, Wisconsin rates 99 percent of its public school teachers as "highly qualified" simply because they hold state licenses. Massachusetts, on the other hand, requires its teachers to demonstrate knowledge in their subject areas before they can earn the "highly qualified" tag.

The topic of teacher qualifications is something that drives Askey right up the wall. Wisconsin's teacher licensing provisions, he says, are too heavy on educational methodology and too light on mastery of subject matter. "Look at the School of Education," he demands. "The *average* grade for students in curriculum instruction is 3.9! Those students are nowhere near that good." Askey gave a speech once in which he compared questions asked of potential teachers in the late 1800s to those on the modern teacher licensing test, in order to illustrate the stunning decline in academic rigor between then and now. (If you want to see for yourself, go to www.zmetro.com/schools and type "askey mad lit" into the search box.)

MATC's Webb agrees with Askey that K-12 academic standards are not what they should be.

"At the very least, I would raise the minimum standards required for graduation," he says. "The requirements now are just not sufficient. Kids need more math, they need more science, and they need to know how to write."

Webb agrees that many high schools do a good job with bright, motivated students. His own daughter, he says, learned to read and write Chinese at Madison's Memorial High School. But far too many students are falling through the cracks.

"High school is just not preparing students at the level they need to succeed in our programs," he says. MATC has such a huge demand for remedial classes that "we will never be able to satisfy the demand for them."

For Fuller, the main obstacles are politics—including the enormous political clout wielded by teachers' unions from the Wisconsin Education Association on down—and money. That includes money to, in effect, buy the union's support for a variety of reforms.

"The teachers' unions do what they are supposed to do: Protect the teachers," he said. That means protecting teachers' wages, hours, benefits and working conditions—not protecting the best interests of students and certainly not promoting any kind of substantive reform. "The unions clearly prevent anything

happening for kids."

"My view is that the one, best system that we all keep trying to achieve is not going to work," says Fuller, noting that the needs of students in inner-city Milwaukee are far different from those of students in small, rural communities. "We need a radical restructuring."

Yet from district to district throughout the state, teachers' unions fight to maintain the status quo. "They oppose parental choice, charter schools, virtual schools . . . anything new," says Fuller. "And until there is a change in the political and power arrangements (that enable the unions to maintain their control over edu-

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cation), I don't see any significant change taking place."

Take Ruth Robart's conviction that the school calendar has to change for Wisconsin schools to become more competitive internationally. Robarts, an associate dean of students at the UW-Madison, was in the front lines of the education wars for years as a member (usually a dissident member) of the Madison School Board.

It's time to upgrade Wisconsin's school calendar to the 21st Century, says Robarts. The current calendar, with its long, summer break, is a relic from the days when the state's economy was much more agriculture-based than it is now. Back then, farm families needed the kids at home during the growing season to help out with the crops and livestock. So is the length of the school day, which was originally established to get kids home in time to help with the daily milking and other farm chores.

But while the number of farm families has dwindled in the past half-century, the school calendar has become entrenched in our culture. Most kids adore it, most teachers and certainly the state's powerful tourism industry are all in favor of it.

Alas, shorter days and longer vacations are one of the principal reasons U.S. students lag behind so many of their international counterparts. While our kids are practicing football after the school day has ended, Japanese students are still in class—and on Saturdays, too. While our kids are lifeguarding in the Dells or waiting tables in Minoqua, students in Europe are still looking forward to their much shorter summer break.

Short days and long breaks are not conducive to learning, Robarts argues. Every fall, teachers spend weeks just reteaching what the children forgot over the summer.

Robarts blames the long summer vacation for at least part of the achievement gaps among white, black and Hispanic students. "Low-income families are totally dependent on schools to educate their children. Middle-class families aren't. Middle-class families compen-

sate by sending their children to camps and enrichment programs, while low-income families are unable to do so. Their kids lose academic progress," she says. Under the current school calendar, "the needs of the children just don't get met."

But Robarts says the teachers' unions will fight changing the calendar every step of the way. "Look at what happened at Crestwood School," she says. At Crestwood, an elementary school on Madison's West Side, students and their parents launched an extremely well-organized campaign to have a five-minute recess tacked on to their lunch hour. In the end, they lost out, because the teachers' union wanted more money for five more minutes of instruction.

If teachers are unwilling to give kids five more minutes without more money, she says, imagine the fight they will put up over any move to extend the school day or year.

Fuller has reservations about extending the school day and year because, he says, so many low-income students have after-school and summer jobs. "For some families, that income is critical," he says.

For any substantive change to take place, he says, organization is key. "There are lots of groups all over the state that want to improve K-12 education, but they're not organized. That's the main thing the unions have going for them: They're highly organized and speak with one voice. The union has a clear notion of what they're doing, which is protecting 'the system'," Fuller says.

People who want to improve Wisconsin's schools, whether they want tougher standards, better instructional methods, better trained teachers, longer hours or year-round school have to work together, Fuller says.

"We have to organize to create a different situation," Fuller says. "In a democracy, what you have to do is fight. You get movement when you create a coalition that can agree on certain principles and work together. That's the only way we're going to get school reform in Wisconsin."