



DEMOCRATS *for*
EDUCATION REFORM

Governors Program **Wisconsin**

A Note From Our CEO

Democrats face a critical juncture in education policy. Over the past decade, our party's traditional advantage on education has eroded, slipping from a 26-point lead over Republicans to now trailing by three. Voters' message is clear: They want something different, but Democrats have offered more of the same.

Wisconsin illustrates both the challenge and the opportunity. Once known for strong public schools and early leadership on choice and accountability, the state has struggled to sustain progress. Too many students still fall behind in reading, and achievement gaps between low- and higher-income students have grown over the past decade. Policymakers have begun to respond with new reading standards, but this reform and school choice are underfunded and unevenly implemented. Without renewed urgency and a forward-looking vision, Wisconsin risks losing its long-standing reputation for educational innovation and excellence.

Across the country, several states are showing that reform can deliver real results for students—proving that progress is possible when leaders act boldly. While much of this progress is occurring in Republican-led states, we believe Democratic Governors and Gubernatorial candidates across the U.S., including in Wisconsin, can claim the mantle of a results-driven education agenda that expands high-quality school choices, empowers and retains highly effective educators, and holds all schools accountable for real results. This is both a political and moral imperative: With the right leadership, Wisconsin can once again lead the nation in education, preparing every student to succeed in college, career, and life, and proving that Democrats are ready to deliver bold, forward-looking change for every child.



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About This Report

This report outlines a policy framework for improving education in Wisconsin through innovation, accountability, and choice. It is intended to inform candidates, campaign staff, and policymakers about both the current state of Wisconsin's education system and the opportunity ahead.

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Overview of Wisconsin's educational landscape and opportunity for renewed progress.

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Organized around three pillars—Innovation, Accountability, and Choice—that together create a roadmap for measurable improvement.

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Executive Summary

Wisconsin has a proud legacy of educational leadership. The state established one of the nation's first free, tax-supported public schools in 1849 and went on to pioneer key reforms that shaped American education: the first private school choice program in 1990, an early charter school law in 1993, and the nation's first state-supported system of technical and vocational education.

Today, more than one million K–12 students across public, private, charter, and home-based settings depend on Wisconsin's schools to prepare them for college, career, and life. But recent results show that student achievement is not keeping pace with expectations. When adjusted for demographics, Wisconsin ranks in the bottom half nationally for most scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), with performance declines over the past decade in both reading and math concentrated among lower-performing students, resulting in growing achievement gaps.

While per-pupil spending has grown, the state's funding formula continues to distribute resources unevenly, leaving gaps in support for special education, charter schools, and high-poverty districts. The state's relatively high rate of dual-enrollment participation reflects strong demand for opportunity, yet too few students who earn early college credit go on to complete degrees on time. Not even a third of Wisconsin high school students are attaining college-ready scores on the ACT.

Unsurprisingly, many Wisconsin voters are deeply concerned about the future. By a 69-point margin, likely 2026 Democratic primary voters believe young people today will be worse off financially than past generations, and they see improving public education as one of the most direct ways to change that trajectory.

There are reasons for optimism. Recent legislative action and state investments show a growing appetite for reform and innovation. Voters increasingly support expanding high-quality public school options and exploring new approaches such as personalized instruction, AI-supported learning, and microschoools that respond to the diverse needs of students and communities.

Wisconsin's long record of innovation proves that progress is possible when bold leadership meets shared commitment. The same spirit that once made Wisconsin a national model for access and innovation can now power the next generation of reform, one that delivers high expectations, modern learning opportunities, and lasting success for every student in the state.

Wisconsin at a Glance

- Student Enrollment: [805,881](#) in district-run traditional public schools and charter schools and [12,280](#) students in independent public charter schools
- Chronic Absenteeism Rate: [20%](#)
- Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Eligibility: [40%](#)
- Students with Disabilities: [15%](#)
- English Language Learners: [6%](#)
- Students with College-Ready ACT Scores: [31%](#)
- High School Graduation Rate: [90%](#)
- Two- and Four-Year College Enrollment: [40%](#)
- [Demographically Adjusted NAEP Rankings:](#)
 - 4th Grade Reading: 34th
 - 4th Grade Math: 31st
 - 8th Grade Reading: 29th
 - 8th Grade Math: 8th

Recommendations At-A-Glance

Innovation

1. Support and Reward Great Educators

Adopt strategic staffing models and targeted pay incentives to attract and retain excellent teachers in hard-to-staff schools and subjects while rewarding those who drive stronger student outcomes.

2. Expand, Strengthen, and Evaluate Dual Enrollment Pathways

Ensure every Wisconsin student can earn meaningful college credits or career credentials in high school that actually count toward degree completion and workforce advancement.

3. Invest in a Range of Innovative School Models

Support and scale high-quality charter schools, early college high schools, magnet schools, and microschools to expand opportunity, accelerate innovation, and align K–12 learning with college and career success.

Accountability

1. Fully Fund Evidence-Based Literacy Supports Across K–12

Deliver the resources promised under Act 20 to ensure every student reads proficiently by third grade through high-quality curriculum, coaching, and early interventions grounded in the science of reading.

2. Adopt a Student-Based Funding Formula with Weights for Disadvantaged Populations

Modernize Wisconsin's outdated funding system by tying resources directly to students and weighting for disadvantage, ensuring equitable funding across districts and alignment with national best practices.

3. Ensure High Standards and Emphasize Results in Accountability

Align school report cards with rigorous NAEP benchmarks and enforce clear, transparent accountability for all schools—especially those chronically underperforming—while empowering families and communities to help drive improvement.

Voters' Voice

Democratic primary voters overwhelmingly favor a return to strong academic standards:

By a +30-point margin (65% to 35%) WI Democrats oppose the changes made by state Superintendent Jill Underly to lower proficiency standards for math and reading in 2024.

Choice

1. Close the Charter School Funding Gap

Ensure charter school students receive equitable funding and facility support so that all public school students—regardless of zip code or governance model—have access to high-quality, innovative learning environments.

2. Leverage the Federal Tax Credit Scholarship Program

Use the new Federal Tax Credit Scholarship program to expand tutoring and out-of-school time opportunities, directing resources to under-resourced students and trusted community organizations that provide academic and enrichment support.

Voters' Voice

Majority of Democratic Primary voters want the governor to opt-in to the Federal Scholarship Tax Credit (FSTC):

After hearing a brief description 59% of Democrats support the program, with support especially strong with Democratic women +41 (64% support / 23% oppose).

Innovation

Wisconsin's next governor has the opportunity to ensure that the state becomes the best place in the country for students to prepare for college, career, and life. In order to do so, they must embrace a spirit of innovation that allows all students to flourish. Wisconsin once had this spirit, when Milwaukee helped spark the charter school movement that has transformed the lives of millions of Americans. The next governor of Wisconsin should reignite that spark by taking the following steps:



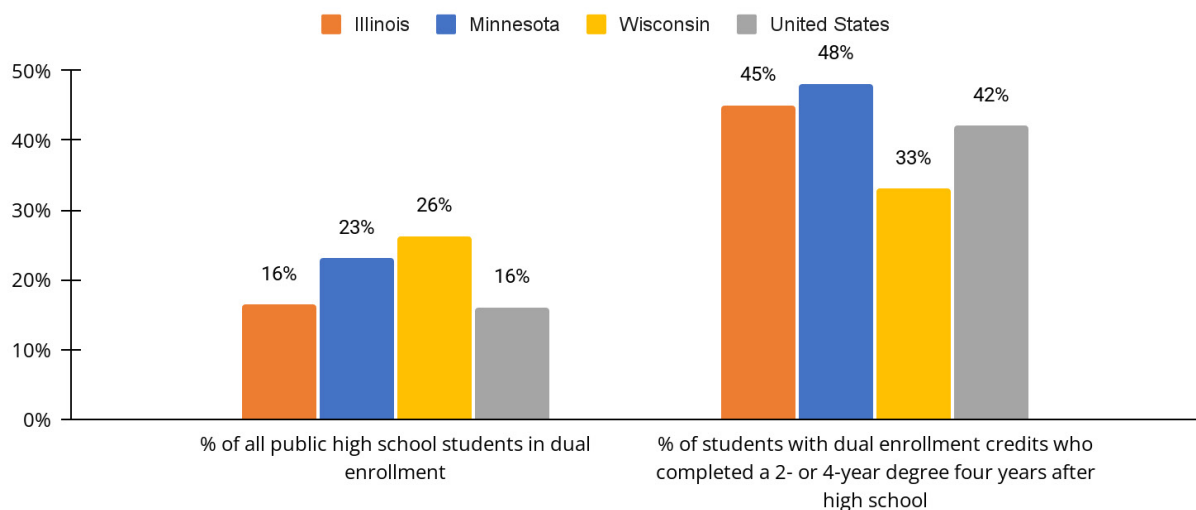
Recommendation 1: Support and reward great educators. In order to create incentives to increase equity and excellence, we recommend the use of [strategic staffing models](#) to accelerate learning and shrink outcome gaps, [supplemental pay](#) for teachers in hard-to-staff schools (e.g., high-poverty and rural schools) and subjects (e.g., special education, English Learner, and STEM classrooms), and additional pay incentives tied to student academic and non-academic outcomes.

An example of innovative policy directly impacting teaching and learning, North Carolina's [comprehensive redesign](#) of the state's teaching profession has included the adoption of a strategic staffing model—[BEST NC Advanced Teaching Roles](#)—which has [significantly improved](#) student outcomes and teacher experiences in participating schools. Students in schools with the model had an additional 1 month of growth in math and science compared to comparable schools without the model. Similarly, a team teaching model in Arizona—[Next Education Workforce](#)—has led to an additional 1.4 months of reading growth for students as well as higher educator effectiveness, lower turnover, and increased job satisfaction.



Recommendation 2: Expand, strengthen, and evaluate dual enrollment pathways. Every secondary student in Wisconsin should have the opportunity to earn college credits and career credentials in high school with an assurance that those credits will help them save money and time. While the state has a relatively high participation rate in dual enrollment programs, only slightly more than a quarter of all public high school students were enrolled in a dual credit class in 2022-23. Even more alarming, only a third of dual enrollment students in Wisconsin go on to earn a college degree four years after high school, suggesting that earned credits are not translating into faster completion of a degree or savings in college costs.

Too many dual enrollment students in Wisconsin are not earning postsecondary degrees.



Sources: [Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Survey](#); [Community College Research Center](#)

Given Wisconsin's relatively low rate of postsecondary degree completion for dual enrollment students, the state should implement an annual evaluation of dual enrollment programs, participation, and outcomes, disaggregated by race, socioeconomic status, and school district, and make the findings easily accessible. This analysis should consider whether dual enrollment credits are transferring for both general education and major courses as well as whether dual enrollment courses are providing the rigor and quality needed to prepare students to succeed in college. We also recommend developing structured pathways that lead students toward workforce credentials or college degrees, paired with strong advising and counseling to ensure quality and alignment. For example, [key policies recently enacted in Indiana](#) have catalyzed the development of a robust career pathways program that links learning in high school to college and career options, leading to positive outcomes for learners.



Recommendation 3: Invest in a range of innovative school models. We recommend providing financial and regulatory support for high-quality charter schools, early college high schools, magnet schools, microschools, and other models outside traditional schools that allow for faster, community-driven, and more iterative innovation. The next governor of Wisconsin should create a task force to craft a cohesive strategy to build these learning ecosystems, aligning all partners around shared K–12 goals.

For instance, graduates of Early College High Schools (ECHS) are [considerably more likely](#) to earn some form of college degree over the next ten years than non-participants and get there faster, allowing them to begin earning wages earlier than they otherwise would. In Massachusetts, ECHS graduates are [14 percentage points more likely](#) (68% versus 54%) to go on to college compared to control-matched peers, and [14 percentage points more likely](#) (58% versus 44%) to persist into a second year of college—a strong predictor of eventual graduation.

Accountability

Wisconsin's next governor must build a shared sense of urgency about creating a school system that achieves positive outcomes for all students, especially those from historically underserved groups.

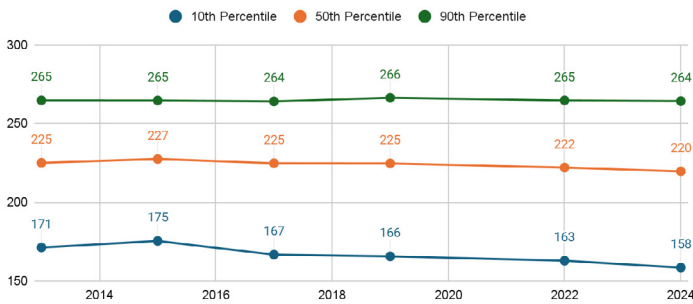
Wisconsin's educational outcomes are middling; kids and voters deserve better results. When adjusted for comparison with demographically similar peers, Wisconsin's NAEP scores in all areas but eighth grade math rank in the bottom half nationally, and in the past decade scores on all four tests have declined 6 to 8 points. The large gap between eighth-grade math scores and fourth-grade math scores should be a cause for alarm. Current 8th graders are doing quite well, but we should be concerned about the younger generation of students and what their performance will look like in four years. Wisconsin needs to stop this decline.

Demographically Adjusted NAEP Rankings (2024)				
	4th Grade Reading	4th Grade Math	8th Grade Reading	8th Grade Math
Illinois	20th	25th	5th	4th
Minnesota	38th	26th	31st	15th
Wisconsin	34th	31st	29th	8th

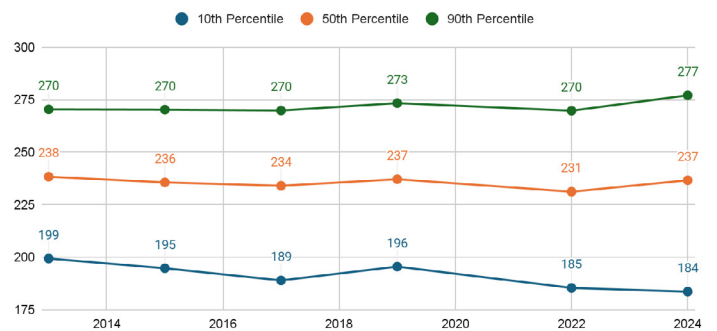
Source: [Urban Institute](#) (2024)

A deeper dive into Wisconsin's NAEP scores reveals a disturbing trend: The achievement gap between the state's strongest students and its weakest is growing larger. While the scores of students in the top ten percent have remained steady over the past decade, the scores of students in the bottom ten percent have steadily dropped, widening the achievement gap between the highest and lowest performers.

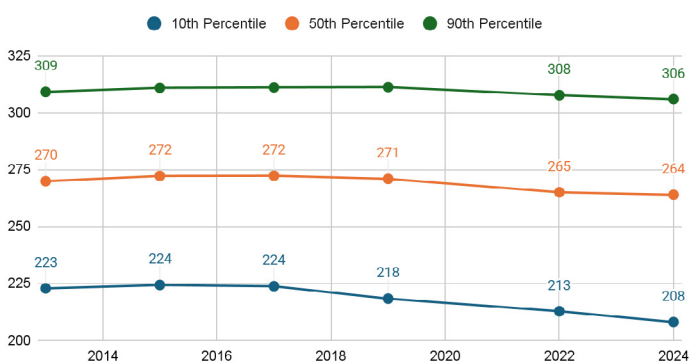
Wisconsin's 4th Grade NAEP Reading Scores by Percentile



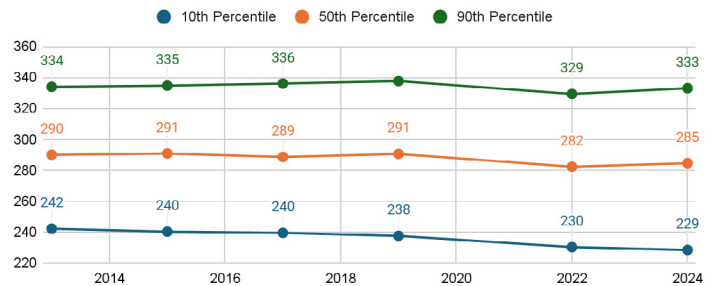
Wisconsin's 4th Grade NAEP Math Scores by Percentile



Wisconsin's 8th Grade NAEP Reading Scores by Percentile



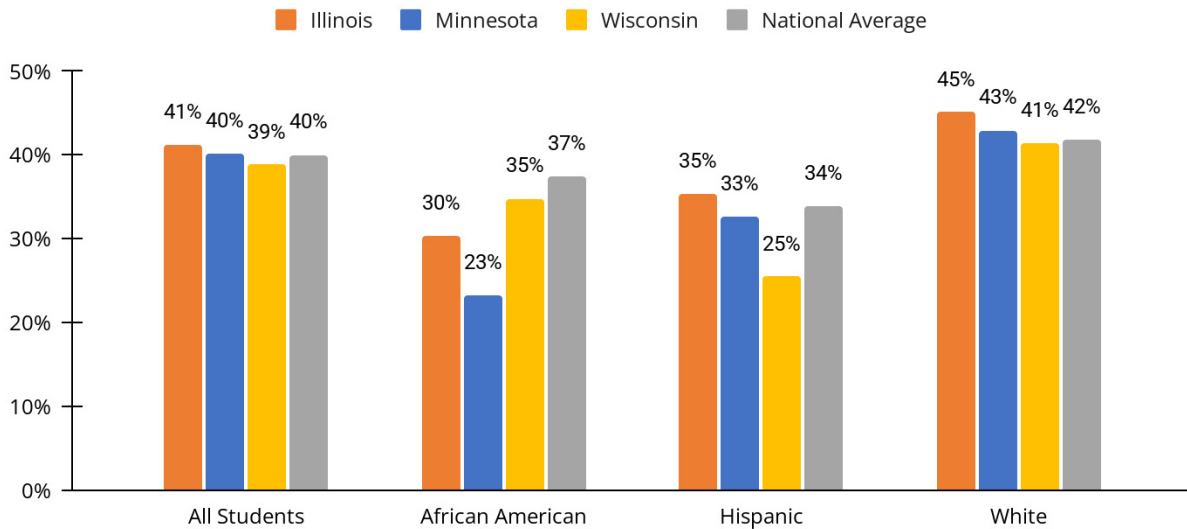
Wisconsin's 8th Grade Math NAEP Scores by Percentile



Source: [The Nation's Report Card](#) (2013-2024)

When it comes to postsecondary outcomes, Wisconsin is, once again, fairly average, trailing just slightly behind the national average overall. In 2025, just 31 percent of high school graduates met three or four of [ACT's College Readiness Benchmarks](#). Outcomes are much worse for Hispanic students, the second largest demographic in the state's public school system. Their postsecondary enrollment rate lags significantly behind Wisconsin's neighbors and the nation as well as the rate for Black and White students in the state.

Wisconsin's Postsecondary Enrollment Rate is Mediocre



Source: [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (2021)



Recommendation 1: Ensure continued implementation of evidence-based literacy supports across K-12.

We applaud the passage of Act 20 in 2023 to require that all Wisconsin teachers are using effective, evidence-based techniques to ensure all students can read by third grade, and we are glad to see that the legislature followed up by providing adequate funding for its implementation beginning in FY26. We are concerned, however, that these necessary financial investments may be interrupted or disrupted due to fluctuations in the current fiscal climate. The next governor of Wisconsin should make sure that the legislature continue to fully fund Act 20. Continued and expanded investments in early literacy and high-school reading mastery, including screening, coaching, and interventions, can help all students develop and maintain age-appropriate reading and writing skills. We also recommend placing greater emphasis on 3rd or 4th grade reading scores in the state's accountability system, as earlier interventions have a greater return on investment. Early interventions are more effective in supporting students and driving long-term improvements across the system.

[Mississippi's](#) spectacular improvement in NAEP reading scores should be a model for Wisconsin. Relying on federally supported research from the Institute of Education Science, the state invested in a curriculum based on the science of reading, provided K-3 teachers with training and support to help students master reading by the end of third grade, and provided targeted support for struggling readers. Mississippi's [Literacy-Based Promotion Act](#) also included provisions for reading coaches, parent communication, individual reading plans, and other supportive measures, some of which may be funded through scholarship granting organizations supported by the new Federal Tax Credit Scholarship program.



Recommendation 2: Adopt a student-based funding formula with weights for disadvantaged populations.

There is broad consensus in the field that a Student-Based funding formula is the [best school funding model](#) due to transparency, flexibility, and equity. This consensus is reflected in state policies, with 35 states and D.C. now using a Student-Based formula model. Pivoting to this model would bring Wisconsin in step with two-thirds of states and ensure fairer funding for disadvantaged student populations. Wisconsin should also look to Illinois, which has implemented [evidence-based funding](#), which sends more resources to Illinois' most under-resourced students in order to start ensuring all schools have the resources they need.



Recommendation 3: Ensure high standards and emphasize results in accountability.

The next governor should introduce stronger reporting requirements and accountability measures for all schools but especially chronically underperforming schools. They should support the passage of [ABI/SB 18](#), which would require the assessment standards on school report cards to align to the more rigorous NAEP standards. Legislation should provide clearer, more stringent guidance, aligned with the conditions for entering into and out of various levels of state support or intervention. Lasting improvements in education depend on centering the affected community, so that families who have too often been left out of decision-making can play a meaningful role in shaping the development of a better educational ecosystem. Any major reforms tied to district or school transformation efforts must include concrete measures to center community members in decision-making.

Turnaround laws in states like [Massachusetts](#) and takeover efforts in cities like [New Orleans](#) tend to be more successful when paired with a broader reform agenda including funding reform, tracking outcomes beyond high school, and innovative approaches like New Orleans's creation of the nation's most intensive market-based school system.

Choice

Wisconsin and Milwaukee played a historic role in the evolution of school choice as a way to empower students and families, but its commitment to choice has come into question due to underfunding charter students and rejecting the opportunity represented by the new Federal Tax Credit Scholarship program.

Charter schools were [first authorized in 1993](#) in Wisconsin and have grown more than tenfold in number since then. In 2022-3, Wisconsin ranked [tenth in the nation](#) for the number of charter schools. Black and Hispanic students are disproportionately represented in charter schools, and serve a [higher proportion of economically disadvantaged students](#) than traditional public schools, which only makes [the funding gap](#) for charter school students a more urgent concern.

Wisconsin's Public School Population by Race/Ethnicity

	2023-24					
	All Charters in State	All Schools in State*	All Charters Excluding City of Milwaukee	All Schools Excluding City of Milwaukee*	All Charters in City of Milwaukee	All Schools in City of Milwaukee*
White, not Hispanic or Latino	46.3%	67.8%	69.1%	72.5%	4.8%	10.7%
Black or African American, not Hispanic or Latino	20.2%	8.0%	7.0%	4.5%	44.1%	50.1%
Hispanic or Latino	21.8%	13.5%	14.0%	12.4%	36.0%	27.4%
Asian	5.7%	4.2%	2.4%	4.0%	11.7%	6.8%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0.6%	1.0%	0.9%	1.1%	0.3%	0.4%
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%
Two or more races	5.3%	5.4%	6.5%	5.4%	3.0%	4.5%

Source: The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2024

*Excludes Charter Schools

Independent charter schools authorized by the University of Wisconsin system or technical colleges have their payment amount set in state law. Charter schools under the purview of school districts negotiate individual contracts with schools on the funding amount. Milwaukee Public Schools, home to the vast majority of district charters, generally funds schools at an amount similar to independent charters. Independent [charters receive almost \\$6,000 less](#) per pupil than do traditional public schools, where the average per-pupil finding is \$18,500 after removing charter schools from the equation. Wisconsin provides [no direct funding](#) for charter facilities.



Recommendation 1: Close the charter school funding gap. The next governor should lead on implementing policies and regulatory reforms to support the growth of more high-quality charter schools. Charters are public schools that can offer innovative programs and learning approaches while being held accountable for results. Expanding access to strong charter schools means more families—especially those in communities with limited high-quality options—can find schools that match their child’s needs and set them up for success in college, career, and life.

Expanding access to high-quality charter schools requires a focus on both enabling policy and strategic support. Direct support for high-performing charter operators—especially in securing or developing facilities—should be a priority. Closing the funding gap between charters and traditional public schools should be treated as the civil rights issue that it is. A [student-based funding model](#) would be more equitable and more in line with Wisconsin’s longstanding commitment to choice.



Recommendation 2: Leverage the Federal Tax Credit Scholarship program. The new Federal Tax Credit Scholarship (FTCS) program represents an opportunity to expand access to high-quality out-of-school time programs and for accelerating learning through evidence-based tutoring for students who need it the most. We recommend embracing the FTCS program and designing it to serve under-resourced students and families in public and private schools by providing free services through scholarship granting organizations and identifying trusted community-based organizations and other institutions that provide academic and non-academic support to K-12 students. Out-of-school time programming provides academic enrichment and innovative learning opportunities for young people to build durable skills. It also provides working class families with additional child care support, ensuring their children are in safe, supportive environments after school and on the weekends.

Moving **Forward**

The next governor has a chance to transform education in Wisconsin, from the first day a child enters school to the skills and opportunities they leave with upon graduation. By embracing innovation that opens doors for every student, ensuring schools deliver strong results, and expanding high-quality options for families, the next governor can build a brighter future. This is how children, families, educators, and communities across Wisconsin will thrive for generations to come.

Key Data Insights and Communication Strategies for Wisconsin Democratic Primary Electorate:

Recent polling of likely 2026 Democratic primary voters in Wisconsin reveals a strong appetite for new education ideas rooted in results and opportunity. Voters see better schools as key to economic mobility, express broad support for innovation and choice within public education, and want leaders who deliver measurable improvement rather than incremental change.

Insight 1: Families See Education as the Bridge to a Better Future

Data:

- 82% of likely 2026 Democratic primary voters believe young people today will be worse off financially than their parents or grandparents.
- When asked which issues leaders should prioritize to improve economic outcomes for young people, voters ranked improving public schools second (23%)—behind only reducing inflation and costs (49%) and ahead of lowering healthcare costs (14%), college affordability (4%), and stopping job outsourcing (5%).

Implication:

Education reform should be framed as an economic issue. Emphasize that improving schools is not about managing decline, but about growing opportunity, expanding horizons, and restoring optimism for the next generation.

Insight 2: Voters Want Innovative, High-Quality Public School Options

Data:

- Nearly eight in ten Democratic primary voters say that expanding access to high-quality public school choices—including magnet, charter, and tribal-compact schools—is important to improving education in Wisconsin.

Implication:

Voters want choice tied to outcomes, not ideology. Messaging should focus on how new school models improve results for all children, not just on expanding options. Emphasize that parents know kids learn differently and that Wisconsin must modernize its schools to meet diverse learning needs.

Insight 3: Support for the Federal Tax Credit Scholarship Program

Data:

- 59% of Democratic primary voters support the Governor opting Wisconsin into the Federal Tax Credit Scholarship Program, with only 27% opposed.
- Support is especially strong among Democratic women (+41) and younger voters aged 25–49 (+40 to +46).

Implication:

Leaders should message participation in the Federal Tax Credit Scholarship Program as a way to deliver on voter priorities, expand access to tutoring and enrichment programs, and ensure equitable implementation that benefits underserved families.