

# Jeremy Thiesfeldt

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STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 52nd ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

## **Testimony on Assembly Bill 859** **Early Learning Pilot Program** *Assembly Committee on State Affairs*

Good afternoon, Chairman Swearingen and honored members of the Committee. Thank you for allowing me to testify on Assembly Bill 859, an important bill that should be instrumental in making a difference in education in Wisconsin.

Our goal should be to ensure that every child in Wisconsin is getting the best education possible. According to the most recent report cards, over 60% of Wisconsin students are not proficient in reading or math. Even more horrifically, Wisconsin's learning achievement gap between white and minority students is the worst in the country, and it's been that way for far too long. To help this situation, last session we in the Legislature passed Assembly Bill 662, which was signed into law.

Research consistently shows that making sure our youngest children arrive in kindergarten ready to learn is a tremendous indicator of future success. Last session's AB 662 started the UPSTART pilot program in Wisconsin. UPSTART is a proven, home-based kindergarten readiness program. Pre-school students, mainly 4 years of age, use the UPSTART program for 15 minutes a day, five days a week and receive an individualized reading, math and science curriculum with an emphasis on reading.

UPSTART has shown tremendous results not only in getting kids ready for kindergarten, but also in helping them be successful during their elementary school years. A study by the Utah State Board of Education in 2016 found that children using UPSTART demonstrated significantly increased literacy skills, and the gains lasted beyond kindergarten with participants continuing to outperform state averages through fourth grade. While that was true of all students, it was even more pronounced with low income, minority, and special education students.

Last session's AB 662 established a three-year UPSTART pilot program in Wisconsin funded at \$500,000 a year. Only children who qualify for free and reduced lunch are eligible for the program, and the program is limited to six school districts in the state. The program is in year two and is really helping students. However, going into year three of the program, we have the ability to reach even more students, and that's what this bill, AB 859 does.

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*Serving the communities of Fond du Lac, Oakfield, Byron, Empire, Taycheedah, and the western half of Calumet township*

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This bill allows children from across the state to enter into the third year of the pilot program. Children still need to qualify for free and reduced lunch, so we are ensuring that the program is for those families who really need it most. This also means that this bill has the ability to help each of your districts, as families in every district in the state will be able to participate in the program.

This bill should help to see if UPSTART can be the difference maker in Wisconsin that has been seen in other states and see if we can finally decrease the achievement gap that has made Wisconsin last in the nation for far too long.

This bill did pass the Assembly Committee on Education unanimously last session. It passed the full Assembly last session, and the bill was signed into law. DPI supported the bill as well.

We would love your support on this important bill that will really help families across Wisconsin. Thank you.

*Serving the communities of Fond du Lac, Oakfield, Byron, Empire, Taycheedah, and the western half of Calumet township*

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## Wisconsin Waterford Upstart Pilot – Interim Report

November 2021

**Wisconsin Online Early Learning Pilot Program:** On March 3, 2020, **Governor Tony Evers signed legislation that created an online early education pilot program in Wisconsin (2019 Wisconsin Act 170)**. Under the legislation, an “online early learning program” means a program that satisfies all of the following criteria:

- The program provides computer-based instruction to children on a home computer connected by the Internet to a centralized file storage facility.
- The program is designed to improve a child's transition to 5-year-old kindergarten.
- The program contains content in reading, math, and science.
- The program is aligned with nationally recognized early learning standards.
- At no cost to low-income families participating in the program, the program provides access to a computer or Internet service, or both, in the homes of low-income families participating in the program that do not have a computer or Internet service access in their home.
- The program includes a parental engagement and involvement component that includes interaction with a learning coach provided by the program.
- The program includes an evaluation component that measures a child's growth over the course of the program.
- The program is being administered by a service provider in at least 2 other states.

Under the program, the **Department of Public Instruction (DPI) awards a three-year contract to a nonprofit service provider to administer the program to low-income children** that reside in three urban and three rural school districts that have reading achievement gaps, as selected by DPI.

The legislation also **requires the nonprofit service provider selected for the program to provide \$500,000 in matching funds** during the three-year term of the contract.

On October 2, 2020, **DPI approved the grant application from Waterford.org** to administer the online early education pilot program and selected the following school districts for the program: **Green Bay Area Public School District, Lac du Flambeau No. 1 School District, Milwaukee Public Schools, North Crawford School District, Racine Unified School District, and Siren School District.**

**About Waterford Upstart:** Waterford Upstart is an **in-home kindergarten readiness program** that was **created by the Utah State Legislature in 2009**. The program is implemented by Waterford.org and helps children develop the cognitive and social-emotional skills they need for school success.

- Preschool-age children use **Waterford Upstart in the home for 15-20 minutes a day**, five days a week. The usage model falls **well within the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommendation of no more than one hour of screen time per day for 4-year-old children.**
- Children receive a **personalized curriculum in reading, math and science** with an emphasis on reading.
- **Each family receives coaching to ensure strong parental engagement.** Waterford Upstart empowers parents in the education of their young children through a parent engagement curriculum developed over the program's 11 years of experience working with families. While the curriculum is in English, **families are supported in English and Spanish, with translation services offered for additional languages**, as needed.
- **Social-emotional learning** is modeled in the curriculum and developed by parents through off-line activities.
- **Computers and Internet service are provided** as part of the program if the home does not have them.

**2021-2022 Wisconsin Upstart Program:** **Waterford Upstart is aligned to Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards;** Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework; and endorsed by the Council of Administrators of Special Education.

- Approximately **270 preschool-age children** registered for the **2021-2022 Wisconsin Upstart Program.**
- Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, all family trainings and initial student assessments were implemented virtually.



### Registrations by Municipality

Municipality	Count
Allenton	1
Cudahy	1
Danbury	1
Frederic	1
Gays Mills	3

Municipality	Count
Green Bay	47
Lac Du Flambeau	11
Mequon	1
Milwaukee	138
Minocqua	1

Municipality	Count
Mt Pleasant	1
Oak Creek	1
Racine	52
Siren	2
Soldiers Grove	1

Municipality	Count
South Milwaukee	1
Sturtevant	1
Wauwatosa	1
Webster	3
West Allis	2

### Demographic Information

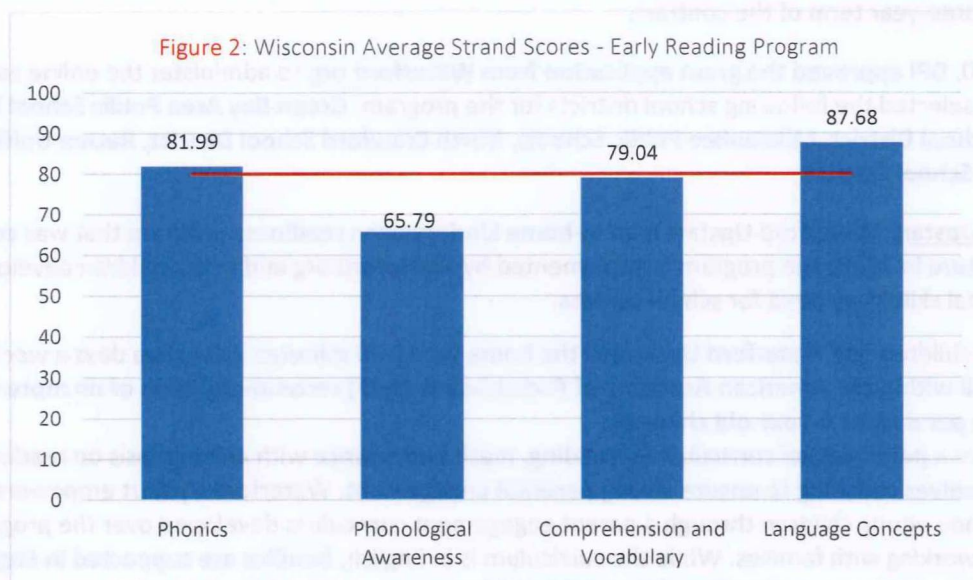
Ethnicity/Race	Count	Percent
African American	101	37.41%
Hispanic	78	28.89%
Caucasian	36	13.33%
Native American/Alaskan Native	20	7.41%
Other	15	5.56%
Decline to Answer	14	5.19%
Asian	6	2.22%

Technology Provided	Count	Percent
Received Computer	211	78.15%
Received Internet Service	58	21.48%

Socioeconomic Status	Count	Percent
Total Registrations	270	100.00%
≤185% of Federal Poverty Level	267	98.89%
≤100% of Federal Poverty Level	192	71.11%

**Strand Scores:** Reading strand scores are scores for subskills as a percentage of 100. A score of 80 or higher within the Waterford Early Reading Program represents mastery, which is the goal of the cognitively based Waterford Upstart program. The sequencer, within the software, individualizes instruction to provide remediation until a child achieves mastery.

Figure 2 shows the average score, organized by strand, for all students who scored on a given strand for reading. The red line represents the expected average score, 80. The average score for two of the four reading strands was above 80.



\* *Note:* Phonological awareness is an individual's understanding of the sound structure of words (e.g., what rhymes with cat?). As such, it is a difficult skill to learn, aligned closely to age, with significant growth seen even in month variations. While Waterford Upstart helps students work on this skill through the curriculum and offline family activities, there is generally lower performance on this skill strand for preschool-age children.

**Average Overall Scores:** Within the curriculum, the expected average overall score, 80, represents "mastery" of material. After ten weeks on the program, the average overall score within the Early Reading Program was 78.46 for children in the Wisconsin Upstart pilot.



## Wisconsin 2020-2021 School Year – Summary of Final Outcomes

**Wisconsin Online Early Learning Pilot Program:** On March 3, 2020, **Governor Tony Evers signed legislation that created an online early education pilot program in Wisconsin (2019 Wisconsin Act 170)**. Under the legislation, an “online early learning program” means a program that satisfies all of the following criteria:

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- The program includes a parental engagement and involvement component that includes interaction with a learning coach provided by the program.
- The program includes an evaluation component that measures a child's growth over the course of the program.
- The program is being administered by a service provider in at least 2 other states.

Under the program, the **Department of Public Instruction (DPI) awards a three-year contract to a nonprofit service provider to administer the program to low-income children** that reside in three urban and three rural school districts that have reading achievement gaps, as selected by DPI.

The legislation also **requires the nonprofit service provider selected for the program to provide \$500,000 in matching funds** during the three-year term of the contract.

On October 2, 2020, **DPI approved the grant application from Waterford.org** to administer the online early education pilot program and selected the following school districts for the program: **Green Bay Area Public School District, Lac du Flambeau No. 1 School District, Milwaukee Public Schools, North Crawford School District, Racine Unified School District, and Siren School District.**

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- **Each family receives coaching to ensure strong parental engagement.** Waterford Upstart empowers parents in the education of their young children through a parent engagement curriculum developed over the program's 11 years of experience working with families. While the curriculum is in English, **families are supported in English and Spanish, with translation services offered for additional languages**, as needed.
- **Social-emotional learning** is modeled in the curriculum and developed by parents through off-line activities.
- **Computers and Internet service are provided** as part of the program if the home does not have them.



**2020-2021 Wisconsin Upstart Program:** Waterford Upstart is aligned to Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards; Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework; CASEL Social and Emotional Learning Competencies; and endorsed by the Council of Administrators of Special Education.

- Approximately 170 preschool-age children registered for the **2020-2021 Wisconsin Upstart Program**.
- Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, all family trainings and initial student assessments were implemented virtually.

**Registrations by Municipality**

Municipality	Count
Caledonia	1
Franksville	2
Frederic	1
Gay Mills	2
Grantsburg	1

Municipality	Count
Green Bay	8
Jackson	1
Lac du Flambeau	6
Milwaukee	36
Mount Pleasant	2

Municipality	Count
Racine	85
River Hills	1
Siren	8
Soldiers Grove	8
Spooner	1

Municipality	Count
Trego	1
Wauzeka	1
Webster	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>171</b>

**Demographic information for registrants follows:**

Registrations	Count	Percent
Total Registrations	171	100%
≤200% Federal Poverty Level	168	98.25%
≤100% Federal Poverty Level	114	66.67%

Ethnicity/Race	Count	Percent
African American	58	33.92%
Asian	2	1.17%
Caucasian	59	34.50%
Hispanic	32	18.71%
Native American/Alaskan Native	10	5.85%
Other	11	6.43%

**Equipment Distributed**

Equipment Provided	Count	Percent
Received Computer	90	52.63%
Received Internet Service	20	11.70%

**Average Weekly Usage:** Wisconsin Upstart participants' average **reading usage** on a weekly basis was **49 minutes** compared to the usage criterion of 75 minutes per week. The average total usage of the Early Reading Program (ERP) was **1413 minutes**, with the goal of reaching 1500 minutes to demonstrate Kindergarten-readiness.

Math and Science usage is optional. Wisconsin Upstart participants' average total usage of the Early Math and Science (EMS) program was **756 minutes**.

**WACS Grade Equivalent Difficulty Ranges:** The following table provides **question difficulty ranges for the Waterford Assessment of Core Skills (WACS) by grade level**. Each grade level is divided into thirds: Kindergarten Beginning, Kindergarten Intermediate, and Kindergarten Advanced.

Grade	Beginning	Intermediate	Advanced
Preschool	1001 - 1333	1334 - 1666	1667 - 2000
Kindergarten	2001 - 2333	2334 - 2666	2667 - 3000
First	3001 - 3333	3334 - 3666	3667 - 4000
Second	4001 - 4333	4334 - 4666	4667 - 5000

\* *Note: Waterford.org was not able to proctor in-person assessments because of COVID-19; accordingly, start of program results were adjusted based on previously proctored Upstart participants.*

**Average final scores for children that completed WACS** showed the following **notable outcomes**:

- **Children’s outcomes averaged at the “Kindergarten Intermediate” level** (with an average final WACS score of 2635.50), where most children score towards the midway point of the Kindergarten year, only 3 points below the “Kindergarten Advanced” level.
- **83.33% of children scored at “Kindergarten Beginning” or above**, demonstrating strong school readiness outcomes.

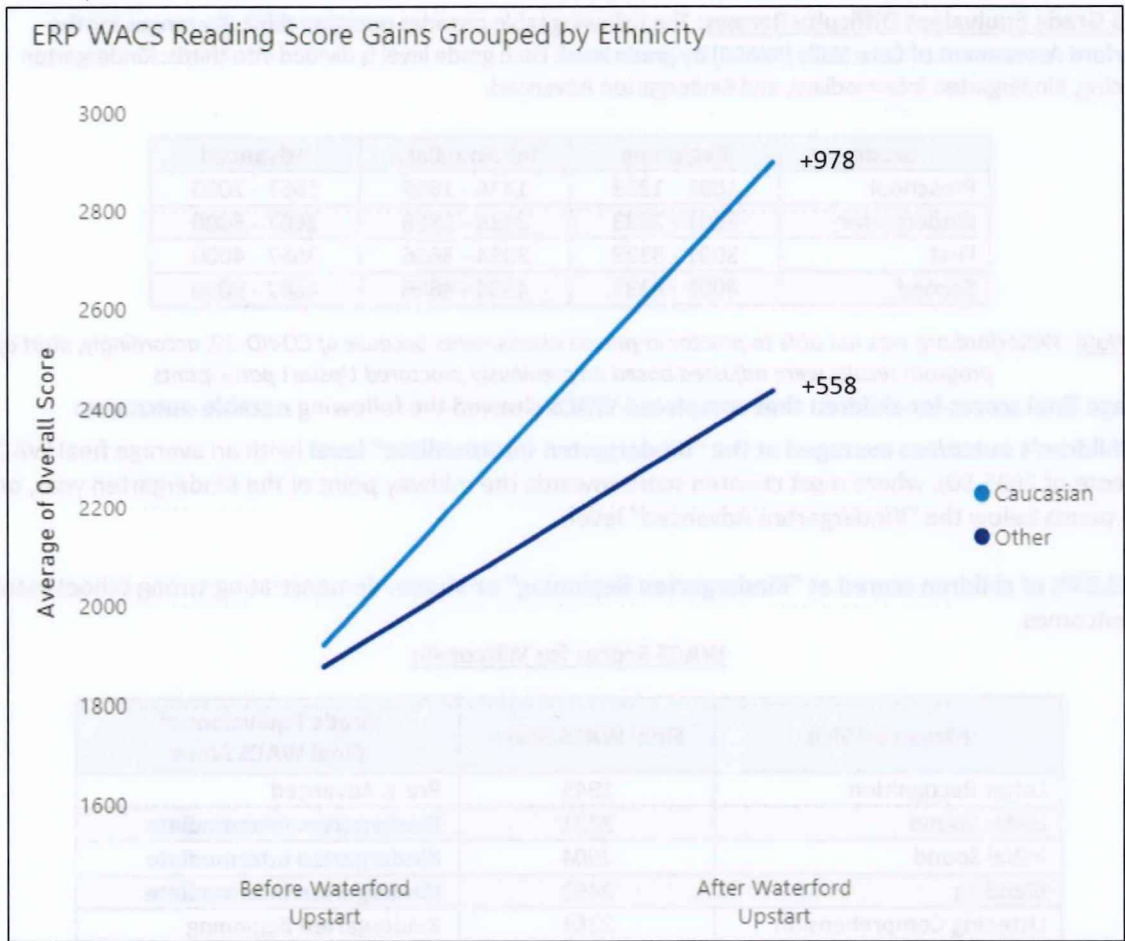
**WACS Scores for Wisconsin**

Measured Skill	Final WACS Score	Grade Equivalent of Final WACS Score
Letter Recognition	1945	Pre-K Advanced
Letter Sound	2431	Kindergarten Intermediate
Initial Sound	2604	Kindergarten Intermediate
Blending	2493	Kindergarten Intermediate
Listening Comprehension	2263	Kindergarten Beginning
Non Words	3281	1 <sup>st</sup> Grade Beginning
Sight Words	3263	1 <sup>st</sup> Grade Beginning
Real Words	3673	1 <sup>st</sup> Grade Advanced
Reading Comprehension	4015	2 <sup>nd</sup> Grade Beginning
Vocabulary	3126	1 <sup>st</sup> Grade Beginning

\* *Note that “Kindergarten Beginning” is highest possible achievement level for the “Letter Recognition” skill.*

The following are highlights from the results.

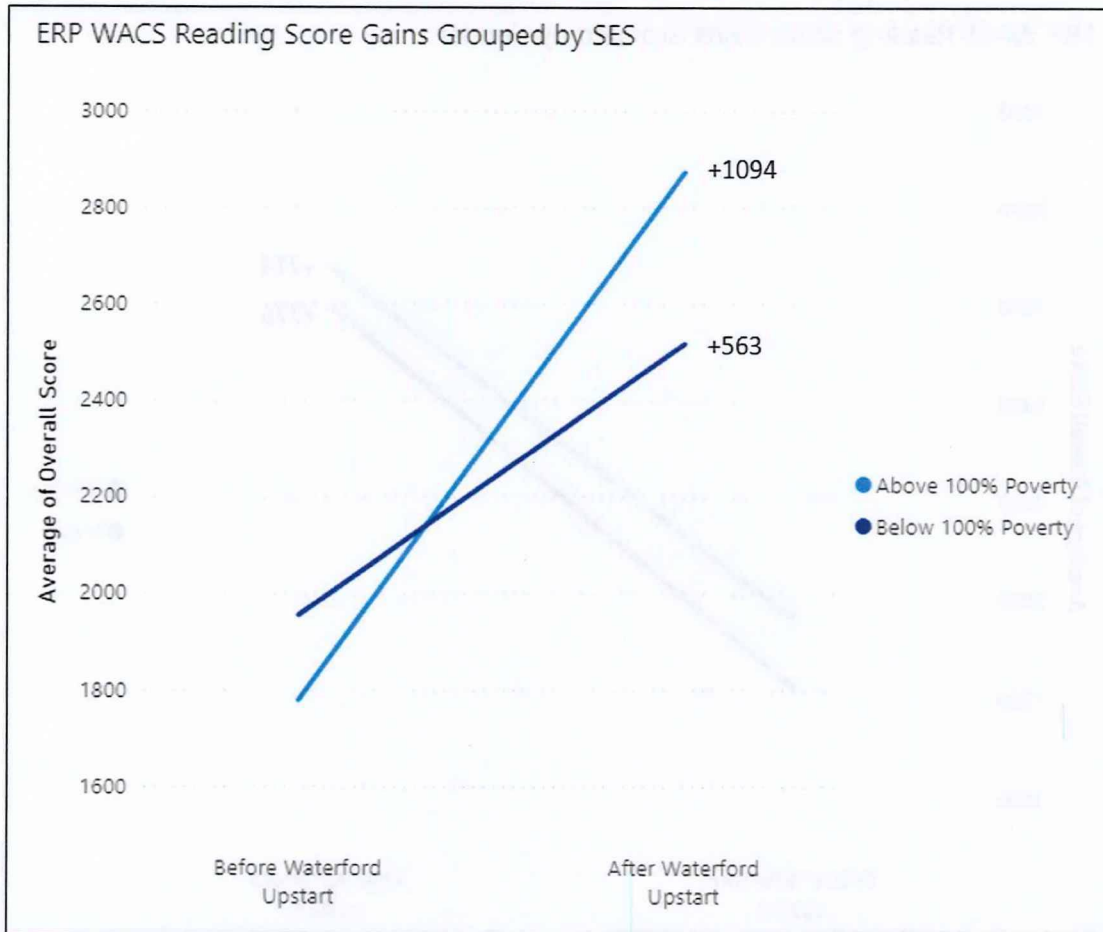




WACS reading score gains grouped by reported ethnicity/race show Caucasian children finishing within the Kindergarten Advanced level and all other children in the program finishing within the Kindergarten Intermediate level.

Ethnicity	Average Final WACS Score	Grade Equivalent of Average Final WACS Score
Caucasian	2898.38	Kindergarten Advanced
Other	2434.47	Kindergarten Intermediate





WACS reading score gains grouped by reported socio-economic status show children above 100% of the federal poverty guidelines finishing within the Kindergarten Advanced level, and children below 100% of the federal poverty guidelines within the Kindergarten Intermediate level.

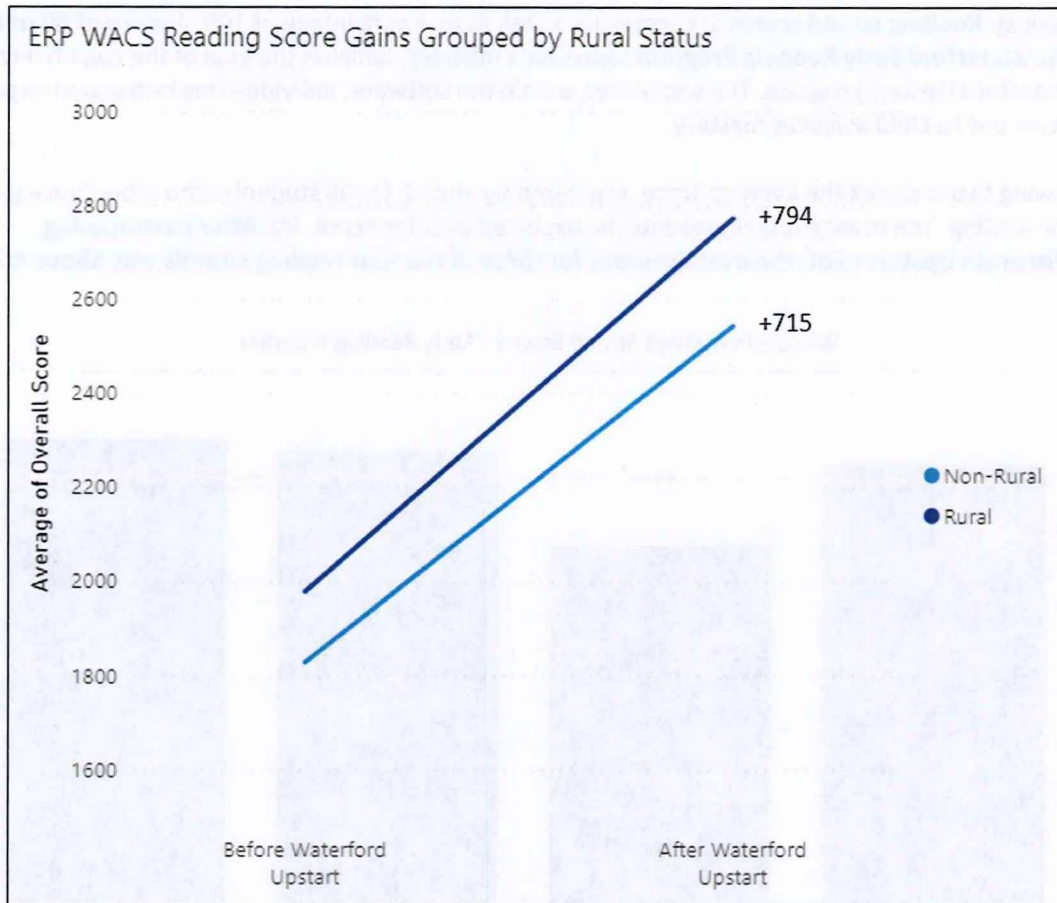
Socioeconomic Status	Average Final WACS Score	Grade Equivalent of Average Final WACS Score
Above 100% of Poverty	2872.80	Kindergarten Advanced
Below 100% of Poverty	2516.85	Kindergarten Intermediate



WACS reading score gains grouped by reported gender show girls finishing at the Kindergarten Advanced level and boys finishing at the Kindergarten Intermediate level.

Gender	Average Final WACS Score	Grade Equivalent of Average Final WACS Score
Female	2677.00	Kindergarten Advanced
Male	2599.19	Kindergarten Intermediate



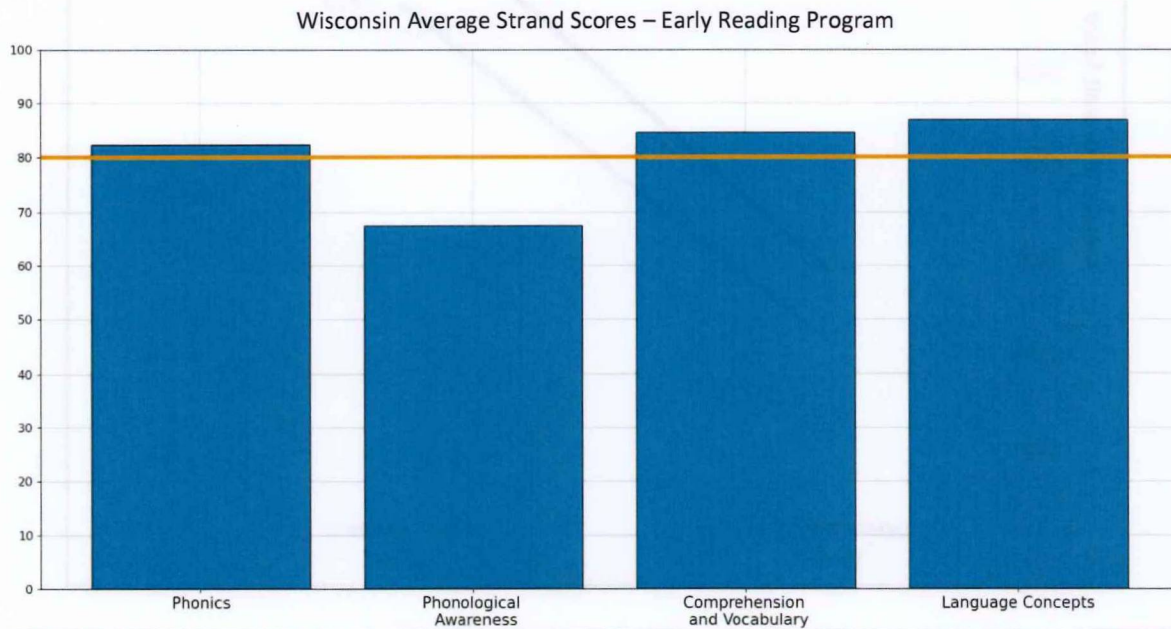


WACS reading score gains grouped by rural status show rural children finishing at the Kindergarten Advanced level and non-rural children finishing at the Kindergarten Intermediate level.

Rural Status	Average Final WACS Score	Grade Equivalent of Average Final WACS Score
Non-Rural	2543.83	Kindergarten Intermediate
Rural	2773.00	Kindergarten Advanced

**Strand Scores:** Reading strand scores are scores for subskills as a percentage of 100. A score of 80 or higher within the Waterford Early Reading Program represents mastery, which is the goal of the cognitively based Waterford Upstart program. The sequencer, within the software, individualizes instruction to provide remediation until a child achieves mastery.

The following figure shows the average score, organized by strand, for all students who scored on a given strand for reading. The orange line represents the expected average score, 80. After participating in the Wisconsin Upstart pilot, the average score for three of the four reading strands was above 80.



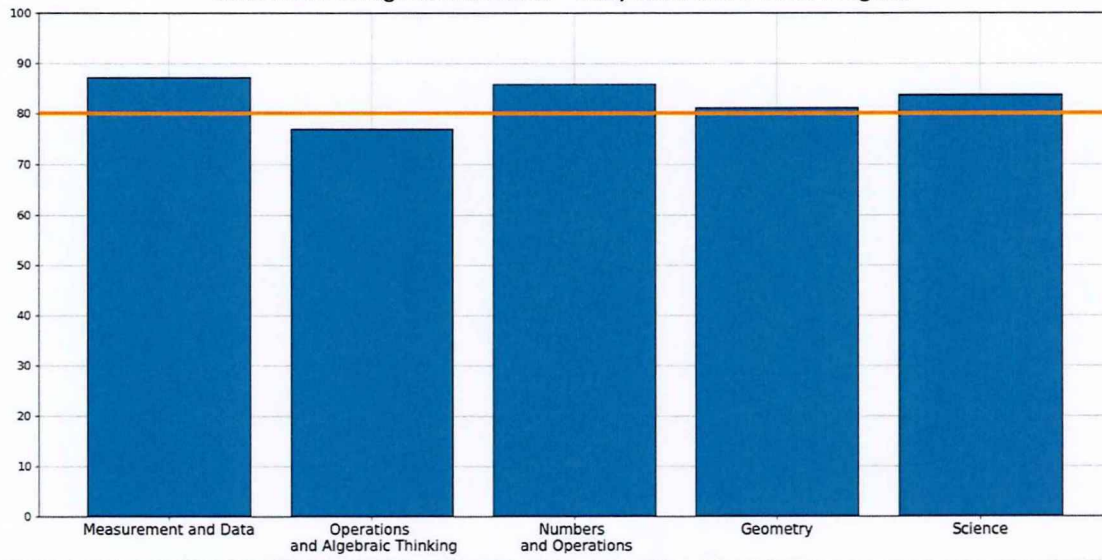
*\* Note: Phonological awareness is an individual’s understanding of the sound structure of words (e.g., what rhymes with cat?). As such, it is a difficult skill to learn, aligned closely to age, with significant growth seen even in month variations. While Waterford Upstart helps students work on this skill through the curriculum and offline family activities, there is generally lower performance on this skill strand.*

**Math and Science Program Outcomes:** Math and science strand scores are scores for subskills as a percentage of 100. A score of 80 or higher within the Waterford Early Math and Science Program represents mastery, which is the goal of the cognitively based Upstart program. The sequencer, within the software, individualizes instruction to provide remediation until a child achieves mastery.

The following figure shows the average score, organized by strand, for all students who scored on a given strand for math and science. The orange line represents the expected average score, 80. After participating in the Wisconsin Upstart pilot, the average score for four of the five math/science strands was above 80.



Wisconsin Average Strand Scores – Early Math and Science Program



**70.79% of students had an overall math and science score of 80 or higher; the average overall score was 83.90** after completing the Wisconsin Upstart program.

**Parent Satisfaction:** Parents/guardians participating in the Wisconsin Upstart implementation completed a comprehensive survey to provide feedback related to their, and their child’s, experience in the program.

% Agree	Survey Question
<b>72% YES</b>	The program helped prepare my child for kindergarten.
<b>89% YES</b>	I feel confident that I can help my child transition from PreK to kindergarten.
<b>89% YES</b>	I like that the program expects our family to create a daily routine for using it.
<b>78% YES</b>	The program helped prepare ME to help my child in school next year.
<b>78% YES</b>	The program helped me realize the importance of participating in my child's learning.
<b>72% YES</b>	The program made me feel equipped to engage with my child's teacher next year.
<b>89% YES</b>	When using the program, my child experienced higher quality experiences, compared to other apps or TV programs.
<b>83% YES</b>	The program was engaging to my child.
<b>67% YES</b>	My child is now better able to work independently.
<b>86% YES</b>	A representative gave me what I needed to effectively support my child.
<b>86% YES</b>	A representative helped solve the issues I had.
<b>100% YES</b>	A representative was friendly and polite when we communicated.
<b>100% YES</b>	A representative was knowledgeable about the program and software.
<b>94% YES</b>	In general, did your child enjoy using the program?
<b>94% YES</b>	Do you think the program was age appropriate?
<b>88% YES</b>	Do you feel the weekly usage requirements were appropriate?

Answer	Survey Question
<b>8.22</b>	On a scale of 0 to 10, how likely are you to recommend Waterford Upstart to a friend or colleague?
<b>8.39</b>	On a scale of 0 to 10, overall how satisfied are you with your and your child’s experience using the Waterford Upstart program?