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February 10, 2022

Representative Thiesfeldt and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Assembly Bill 965, which addresses important issues related to our state’s measure of school performance, the Report Card.

My name is Isral DeBruin, and I serve as the Director of Strategy and Communication for City Forward Collective, a Milwaukee-based nonprofit organization whose mission is to eliminate educational inequity by ensuring every Milwaukee child has access to a high-quality school. I’m here today on behalf of our President and Executive Director Dr. Patricia Hoben. We’re grateful to you for taking on this important issue.

Central to our mission is a strong commitment to the importance of performance transparency and accountability: we believe in providing clear and transparent information to parents, families, and other stakeholders about how our city’s – and our state’s – students and schools are performing.

Each year, [Wisconsin publishes Report Cards](#) for every school that receives public tax dollars. These Report Cards are meant to be a scoreboard, helping parents keep track of school quality to make smart choices about where to enroll their children.

Last November, the Department of Public Instruction released the first new Report Cards in two years, following a delay related to the COVID-19 pandemic. These Report Cards provided our city, and our state, with the first big-picture evidence we have of how the pandemic impacted student academic performance. That overall picture wasn’t a pretty one: More than 80 percent of Milwaukee students failed to meet grade level expectations in reading and math.

And yet – more than 70 percent of Milwaukee’s schools earned a Report Card rating of “Meeting Expectations” or better.

We simply don’t believe that those last two statements can both be true. While we know educators in classrooms and schools throughout our city and our state have done their very best to serve students through the pandemic, we also know that the plain and simple truth is that there’s no way that 70% of our schools are “Meeting Expectations” when 80% of students aren’t performing at grade level.

And we're not alone in this view: in polling our organization recently conducted, just one-quarter of respondents rated school quality in Milwaukee as good or excellent, while 41% of respondents reported that they believed school quality in Milwaukee is getting worse.

This disconnect between student outcomes and School Report Card ratings isn't a new, pandemic-related phenomenon, either: Average Report Card scores across Milwaukee have steadily increased since 2016, even as student proficiency, as measured by the Achievement component of the Report Card itself, has actually declined. The scoreboard keeps saying Milwaukee schools are getting better, but in reality – our city's students are falling further behind.

AB 965 addresses two core challenges that our organization believes are directly contributing to this broken scoreboard:

First, the bill addresses the process shortcomings that occurred in the run-up to year's Report Card release, which led to last-minute changes to the scoring scale. The bill requires DPI to undo the late changes that were made to this year's scoring scale, and it ensures that future changes to the Report Card methodology are done in a more timely, transparent, and publicly-accountable manner. While we can all acknowledge that schools were uniquely impacted by the challenges of teaching and assessing students during the pandemic last year, we share the concerns of many other stakeholders that the adjustments made to the Report Card happened without appropriate safeguards and public input, and were done far too late in the process for parents and other stakeholders to understand their impact.

A City Forward Collective analysis shows these late changes had a real impact: The new scale gave 74 Milwaukee schools better ratings than they otherwise would have received, including 42% of the schools operated by Milwaukee Public Schools. And at the district level, these changes moved MPS' Report Card rating up to the "Meets Expectations" level, even though the district's numeric Report Card score actually declined.

We all intuitively know that this doesn't make sense – your grade in school shouldn't go up when your score goes down. And yet, that is exactly what happened as the result of these late changes to the report card.

Second, the bill addresses how the Report Card system combines data measuring student proficiency and student growth to calculate an overall composite score and assign a rating.

Right now, for almost all schools in Milwaukee, the picture of student outcomes is obscured by a Report Card weighting scale, written into state statute, that values student growth at 90%, while weighting proficiency at 10%. At this 9:1 ratio, Wisconsin's report card is a significant outlier when compared to other states. And far more importantly, the current system makes it difficult for parents to assess how well a school is doing on fully supporting the academic growth – and academic achievement – of students.

To be clear: as an organization, City Forward Collective believes that both proficiency and growth are important factors that have to be considered in measuring school performance – but we believe that the current Report Card approach distorts the picture.

To illustrate the point using a personal example: I had the honor of working as a classroom teacher at a charter school on the south side of Milwaukee. A number of my elementary school students entered our classroom multiple grade levels below the grade they were in. My first order of business as their teacher was to assess their starting point, and to create a plan to help them grow as much as possible in the time they were in my class. It was critical that over the course of the academic year, they advance through more than a school year's worth of material to ensure they were making progress toward getting caught up. I'm very proud to say my students managed some of the strongest academic growth of any classroom in our school. While I cared immensely about my students' academic growth, I also cared immensely about their academic proficiency – that they would be able to read, write, perform math, and otherwise meet grade-level academic expectations. Some of my students came into my classroom behind, and left performing at grade-level. Others made significant progress, but had further to go before they achieved proficiency.

Both proficiency and growth were important to me as a teacher, and neither is a substitute for the other: growth without eventually achieving proficiency would have left my students underprepared to lead a thriving adulthood. Proficiency without growth would mean academic stagnation that would have put my students behind their peers over time.

Our organization's analysis shows that this issue is also one that has real implications: if last year's report cards had used the more balanced weighting of proficiency and growth proposed under AB 965, 129 Milwaukee schools would have seen a change in their rating, with 98 seeing no change. The current, imbalanced weighting ratio means more than 55% of MPS district-operated schools received elevated Report Card scores – in some cases by as much as two rating levels. As with the late changes to the scale made by DPI, this obscures the true story of school performance, giving families and stakeholders a false sense of school quality.

Right now, the scoreboard says most Milwaukee kids are not winning. Even though some schools received higher Report Card ratings because of longstanding imbalances and late changes to the rating scale, state assessment results indicate that at least 4 out of 5 Milwaukee students are not performing at grade level, with Black students, students with disabilities, and students from low-income households all disproportionately represented in this group.

More than ever, parents, caregivers, and other stakeholders in our K-12 education ecosystem need to be able to face the brutal facts and understand exactly how Milwaukee students and schools are performing. AB 965 is a necessary and important step in repairing the scoreboard, so parents and caregivers can know the true score, make smart choices for our children, and hold those in power accountable for ensuring our state's students and schools are thriving.



ROBERT WITTKÉ

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 62nd ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

TESTIMONY: ASSEMBLY EDUCATION COMMITTEE
FEBRUARY 10, 2022

Chairman Thiesfeldt and Committee Members,

Thank you for holding a public hearing today on **Assembly Bill 965 (AB 965)** relating to the components, methods, and formulas used by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to publish school and school district report cards.

Assembly Bill 965 seeks to establish, by rule, the qualitative and quantitative measures the DPI will use to create school and school district report cards so schools and districts will know what the expectation is from year to year and the risk of skewed numbers may be averted.

According to the DPI website there were 2,101 public schools and 376 choice school that received report cards for the 2020-21 school year, a year of great uncertainty for schools. Yet the majority of schools met, exceeded, or significantly exceeded expectations. How? 199 public schools and 240 choice schools did not have enough available data to receive scored report cards. "If a school or district lacks data to calculate a priority area score, the measure is omitted and the remaining measures weighed more heavily in the overall score", the website stated.

Assembly Bill 965 would shed light on a process that seems to frequently change, is modified, or perhaps criteria omitted and weighted differently. The rules process will give the public opportunity to participate in the process and offer the standing committees to review and contribute as well. This bill would establish an excellent tool for school and school district accountability.

Again, thank you for holding a public hearing on AB 965.



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February 10, 2022

Chairman Thiesfeldt and members of the Assembly Committee on Education,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on Assembly Bill 965, a proposal by Representative Wittke and Senator Darling regarding to the state report card and limitations on the Department of Public Instruction. I am Libby Sobiech from the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty.

Over the past several years, WILL has published reports regarding some of the major issues of the Wisconsin report card system.¹ However, the Department of Public Instruction's (DPI) latest iteration (for the 2020-2021 school year) made these problems far worse.

The goal of the state's report card should be to provide information about the quality of local schools so families can make informed decisions. But the most recent report cards released by the DPI make it impossible for parents to compare schools to their neighbors, or even track the progress of an individual school over several years.

This year, DPI made three major changes to the report card: changes to how absenteeism is measured, changes to the threshold scores for report card ratings, and a longer-standing issue with the way in which growth is included in report cards. These changes were done without any legislative input. These decisions fundamentally changed the report card data and will prevent a true year-over-year comparison of the data. This essentially makes the report cards a useless tool for parents and schools.

This was bureaucracy overreach. A representative of DPI recently testified that DPI does make calculation changes to the report card before it is released.

Mr. McCarthy testified on January 12th about the DPI's management of the report card's "cut scores." He explained, "when we have the norm and distribution of information we get from report cards, we want them to match. In other words, we want to see the same amount in proportion of schools in all the different categories as we make changes."² This is concerning because the DPI wants to maintain the status quo of the report card system. But let's remember

¹ <https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/final-report-card-policy-brief-9.21.20.pdf>

² January 12, 2022 hearing with the Assembly Committee on Education, <https://wiseeye.org/2022/01/12/assembly-committee-on-education-68/>



that we already have a report where 96% of school districts “met or exceeded expectations”.³ Clearly something is wrong with the distribution of data to begin with.

The goal of the report cards should be to provide a clear understanding of how Wisconsin students and schools are actually performing. Editing the report cards behind the scenes to ensure that the majority of schools look as if they are performing well is a disservice to parents, schools and taxpayers.

AB 965 addresses this specific concern by ensuring that the Department cannot change the report card system again next year. While the harm is already done for this year, AB 965 at least ensures that the report card data is comparable next year.

After nearly two years of unprecedented changes to education, parents, school board members and taxpayers are empowered to better understand how students are learning and where there is room for improvement. By changing the report cards on a whim, DPI has impeded this process, and put yet another roadblock in the path of parents to understanding what is going on with schools in their community.

Thank you,

Libby Sobic

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Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty

³ DPI Press Release, November 2019, <https://dpi.wi.gov/news/releases/2019/most-schools-and-districts-meet-expectations-2018-19-report-cards>