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Report provides detailed look at school district performance and finances in southeast Wisconsin

MILWAUKEE – *Friday, October 10, 2014* –The Public Policy Forum’s annual analysis of data from southeast Wisconsin’s public school districts finds that academic achievement for the region as a whole continues to lag that of the state, in large measure because of the challenges faced by the region’s largest urban districts. Throughout the region, however, there are also plentiful examples of success and progress.

“There are dozens of high-performing districts within the region, as evidenced by the fact that 60 out of 92 are exceeding or significantly exceeding expectations on district report cards,” says Forum Senior Researcher Joe Yeado. “Nevertheless, the region as a whole remains challenged to overcome low proficiency rates and differential educational outcomes associated with race, economic disadvantage, and geography.”

The Forum has produced an annual report on the performance and finances of southeast Wisconsin’s public school districts for the past 28 years. The 2014 edition provides a detailed look at K-12 school enrollments and student demographics, including a special look at English Language Learners and their growing population in southeast Wisconsin districts. The report also reviews trend data for state academic achievement assessments, with breakouts for race and socioeconomic status, and reviews postsecondary readiness and school district spending and revenues.

“This year’s report comes at a time of significant change and transition for public schools in the state, as new standardized tests in mathematics and reading will be administered to students in the 2014-15 school year,” says Yeado. “Taken together, these initiatives offer the possibility of a more thorough understanding of how effectively Wisconsin public school students are being educated and how their academic achievement could be improved.”

The analysis of 2013-14 standardized test performance in reading and math shows that in both areas, the region’s performance continues to lag that of the state as a whole. The region also tends to exhibit larger racial and economic achievement gaps than the state as a whole.

However, when it comes to ACT scores and performance on Advanced Placement (AP) exams, the region slightly outperforms the state.

The report’s annual trend analysis of school district finances, meanwhile, shows that per-pupil expenditures in the 2012-13 ticked downward for the second consecutive year. On the revenue side, the shares of property taxes and state aids being used to fund local school districts increased slightly, while federal assistance declined.

Other major findings from this year’s report:

- **Poverty in the region is still on the rise.** The data indicate 46.1% of students in southeast Wisconsin are eligible for the Free or Reduced Price Lunch program. This is a one percentage point increase from last year’s rate and a 5.1-point increase from the 2009-10 academic year.
- **The region continues to face problems narrowing achievement gaps.** WKCE and four-year adjusted cohort data reveal large racial and economic achievement gaps in student proficiency and graduation rates. Also, new analysis shows little progress in improving racial achievement gaps in the region’s largest districts over the past five years.
- **Positive performances on college and career readiness measures.** Although ACT composite scores saw little change, ACT participation in the region increased 4.1 percentage

points, exceeding the state average. AP participation and number of exams passed increased from 2012, while graduation rates increased for the fourth straight year.

- **Enrollment in the region is declining, but at a slower rate.** Though enrollment in the region dropped from last year, its decline is slowing down. This year's decrease of 0.1 percentage points represents a loss of just 225 students, a far smaller decline than in past years. Minority enrollment increased by 0.8 percentage points over the previous year, now comprising 42.3% of the public school population in the region.
- **Student participation is still a concerning issue.** While attendance remained unchanged, the truancy and dropout rates increased in southeast Wisconsin. In fact, the regional dropout rate is rising at an increasing rate.

The Forum's schools report is sponsored by Alverno College, Children's Hospital of Wisconsin, Multiple Listing Service, Northwestern Mutual Foundation, Southeastern Wisconsin Schools Alliance, and Waukesha County Technical College. Also, the Forum's general education research is supported by the Greater Milwaukee Foundation. A copy of the report can be downloaded at the Forum's web site, www.publicpolicyforum.org.

Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum, established in 1913 as a local government watchdog, is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to enhancing the effectiveness of government and the development of southeastern Wisconsin through objective research of public policy issues.

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