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

**MILWAUKEE** – *Friday, December 22, 2017* – The Public Policy Forum’s annual analysis of data from southeast Wisconsin’s public school districts finds progress on some college readiness indicators and largely positive showings on district report cards. Those results are offset, however, by discouraging results on standardized tests and continued substantial achievement gaps between students of different races and socioeconomic backgrounds.

“The 2016-17 school year marked the second year in a row that 68 of the 92 school districts in southeast Wisconsin are exceeding or significantly exceeding expectations, and for the first time since the report cards’ inception, we also saw no districts in the region fail to meet expectations,” said Anne Chapman, Forum Senior Researcher and the report’s lead author. “Unfortunately, we also find that large gaps between white, African American, and Hispanic students – as well as between students with differing household income levels – continue to endure.”

The report notes that 2016-17 marks a year of relative stability when it comes to assessing district and school performance. School and district report cards are structured much as they were in the 2015-16 school year, and Wisconsin administered the same statewide assessment of math and English Language Arts for elementary grades (the Wisconsin

Forward Exam) for the second consecutive year. This makes year-over-year comparisons of academic performance possible for the first time since 2014-15, when the previous state assessment (the WKCE) was abolished.

“Comparing the region’s performance on the Forward Exam in 2016-17 to the previous year does not yield meaningful differences, as we see improvement in some grades for English and math but declining performance in others” said Chapman. “Unfortunately, the bottom line is that at every grade between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades, the share of the region’s students who demonstrate proficiency or higher in either math or English Language Arts is well below 50%. In fact, this stubborn trend has persisted since 2011 as measured by three distinct statewide assessments.”

The Forum has produced an annual report on the performance and finances of southeast Wisconsin’s public school districts for the past 31 years. The 2017 edition provides a detailed look at K-12 school enrollments and student demographics, including English Language Learners and students with disabilities in southeast Wisconsin districts. The analyses detail the results of the Forward Exam and district report cards and also examine high school achievement measures, such as graduation rates and the ACT and Advanced Placement exams.

The report’s annual trend analysis of school district finances, meanwhile, shows that per-pupil expenditures and revenues in the 2015-16 school year increased in six of the seven counties in southeast Wisconsin. In fact, average spending in the region was \$12,551 per pupil in 2015-16, the highest level since 2010-11.

Other major findings from this year’s report:

- **Pace of school district enrollment decline abating.** Public school district enrollment continues to fall, but at a slower rate than in the recent past. Districts enrolled 817 fewer students in 2016-17 relative to the previous year, a loss of only 0.3%. This comes on the heels of larger one-year losses over the past two years (1.2% in 2015-16 and 0.8% in 2014-15).

- **Minority enrollment continues to grow steadily.** Students of color now make up 44.4% of all students in the region. This reflects a steady upward climb in recent years (from 42.7% in 2014-15 and 43.3% in 2015-16).
- **News mixed on college readiness indicators:** The composite ACT score for the region in 2015-16 was 21.1, a slight uptick (0.2 points) over 2014-15 and a point higher than the statewide score of 20.1. Meanwhile, participation in AP exams continues to grow (to 19.6%), though the pass rate fell by 2.3 percentage points to 63.8%. Graduation rates in the region declined for the second year in a row to 83.2%.
- **No regional progress on achievement gaps.** Gaps in proficiency levels for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade math and ELA have not budged since 2015-16, ranging from 40 to 47 points between African American and white students, and a somewhat narrower range between Hispanic students and their white peers (26 to 33 points). Similar gaps persist for AP pass rates. Racial and income-based achievement disparities on graduation rates (16 to 30 percentage points) and ACT scores (2.6 to 4.9 points) also are large and persistent.

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