

Wisconsin's new school grading index: 'a dog's breakfast of numbers'

By Valerie Strauss , Updated: October 26, 2012

Another day, another state comes up with another cockamamie way to grade schools for "accountability" purposes. In this post Gene V. Glass, Regents' Professor Emeritus at Arizona State University and senior researcher at the University of Colorado-Boulder's [National Education Policy Center](#), looks at the very large problems with Wisconsin's new [Overall Accountability Index](#) meant to grade public schools. (Read it to see why it is being accompanied by a picture of cows.)

By Gene V. Glass

To receive a waiver of No Child Left Behind sanctions, the State of Wisconsin took steps this year to bolster its accountability provisions by creating a [complex system](#) for grading public schools. Its new Overall Accountability Index (OAI) is supposed to reveal to the public which schools are truly doing their job in the high-stakes world of public education and which are not. Some might hope that if your child's school is not "making it," you will quickly seek out a local charter school or even one of the fancy new online virtual schools. Count Gov. Scott Walker among that group. The OAI will, some must believe, hold teachers, administrators and school boards accountable for delivering quality education. How quickly the world has forgotten the advice of quality-control god and statistician W. Edwards Deming, who decades ago reminded us that you don't make a cow fatter by weighing it. You don't make schools better by testing them.

The report card for Wisconsin K-12 schools currently making the rounds is a particularly opaque attempt to grade the quality of education that Wisconsin's children are receiving at the hands of their teachers and administrators. It is as though the Department of Public Instruction has decided to weigh cattle by placing them on a scale to get their weight in pounds then combining that with the wealth of the farmer who raised them, the number of acres of the farm, and the make of car the farmer drives.

In fact, the DPI's Overall Accountability Index is so complex that a [62-page appendix to the report card](#) is required to explain it. In brief, the OAI melds together in some arcane way information about a school's average achievement in reading and math, students' growth in reading and math, the extent to which "gaps" are closing in reading, math and graduation rates, post-secondary readiness measures, absenteeism rates, and drop-out rates. We must presume — as the Wisconsin DPI surely does — that teachers and administrators are responsible for all of these in one way or another.

What emerges from this dog's breakfast of numbers? A measure of the wealth of the community in which the school is located. The correlation between the OAI and the "% Economically Disadvantaged" in the school is nearly $-.70$. That means that the poorer the

children in the school, the lower is the school's number on the Overall Accountability Index; and the relationship is close. In fact, a correlation of .70 is even tighter than the relationship of adults' height to their weight, and both measure a person's size. So what the DPI has created is a handy measure of a community's wealth (SES, Socio-Economic Status) without ever having to ask anyone their income.

As Steve Strieker — a teacher in Janesville, WI (Paul Ryan's hometown)—points out, “Around 75% schools with over 70% economically disadvantage [are graded] ‘fail to meet expectations’.” And “over 90% of schools with less than 10% economically disadvantaged students [are graded] ‘exceed expectations’.” Steve also notes that the one school in Janesville with 50% poverty among its students was graded “significantly exceeded expectations.” Why? Because it was a Talented & Gifted school. (Steve blogs at <http://oneteachersperspective.blogspot.com>.)

So what are the teachers and administrators of Wisconsin's public schools accountable for? Increasing the wealth in their communities? Increasing every child's IQ by 25 points? What we are learning and relearning time and again in education research is that poverty trumps many things: good teaching, and intelligent administration, to name just two. Teachers are important but they are only one influence, and their effects are eradicated day in and day out by the crushing impact of poverty, broken homes, illness, and addiction. This month, David Berliner has powerfully [reminded us](#) of this in his Teachers College Record [article](#) that was downloaded 15,000 times in its first week on the net. Fortunately, there is still an audience for the truth.

What if all this criticism is so much academic quibbling? Suppose your son's or daughter's neighborhood school has a low OAI score. Maybe you should try a charter school or even one of those flashy new online virtual schools where you child can receive what the television ads say is an outstanding and individualized education. But be careful. Wisconsin Virtual Learning — the largest online charter school in the state with more than 600 students and operated by K12 Inc., the Herndon, Virginia-based [private corporation](#) with revenues approaching \$1 billion annually — is only at the 22nd percentile on the OAI scale.