

Madison Scorecard: Will our kids be ready?

3 August 2026 Remarks

Thank you, Dan. Good afternoon, ladies & gentlemen.

Slide 1

I answered the phone, on a landline in the early 2000s. It was a UW-Madison Math professor of note: Richard Askey. “there are a few things you should know”, he began.

Slide 2

Nancy and I have lived here since 1993. Madison turned out to be a terrific place to raise our daughters.

Slide 3

Many publications have listed Madison as a top place to live and raise families over the past few decades.

Children growing up here enjoy fantastic sport, art and education opportunities. 14,000 soccer players, thousands of all city swimmers, many art and music groups. The list is endless.

Slide 4

A professor friend nailed it: if you are engaged and motivated, Madison is a rich, rich place for kids to grow up. “Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.”, attributed to Frederick Douglass.

Slide 5

In 1998, the Madison School Board adopted an important academic goal. We want all 3rd graders to read at or above grade level.

Slide 6

During this time, the United States was the world’s top trading partner. China took our place in 2024.

Slide 7:

On January 20, 2000, Mississippi natives Jim and Sally Barksdale announced a \$100 million gift—the largest private gift to literacy in the nation’s history—and founded the Barksdale Reading Institute.

Barksdale, the former Netscape CEO, could not read in the second grade himself. At the time, the state's fourth graders ranked 49th in the nation. On the nearest NAEP reading assessment (1998), they scored 204 against a national average of 215. Wisconsin was above average, then.

Since then, Mississippi retrained their teachers, placed literacy coaches in the classroom, changed curriculum, changed teacher training in the schools of education, added third-grade advancement limits and most importantly, stuck with the changes.

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Wisconsin in 2003, using our state test data. 80% were proficient! Hurray!

Slide 9

That same year, Wisconsin on the National test. 33% proficient.

Slide 10

2026: The New York Times publishes school district test scores and reports that a Black fourth grader in **Mississippi is now two and a half times** as likely to be proficient in reading as one in California.

Wisconsin, above average in the 1990's now is average, while Mississippi has blown by, despite spending far less on k-12.

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Last Wednesday, July 29, A Madison School District administrator said this during a downtown Rotary club talk.

Slide 12:

How did this happen?

There are many reasons, but at the top, in my opinion, we citizens have to pay attention and demand more from our taxpayer financed organizations.

In 2021, The **League of Women Voters of Wisconsin** lobbied against AB446, an early literacy bill vetoed that year by Governor Evers, but ultimately passed as Act 20 in 2023, after two vetoes. The goal of Act 20 is to implement some of the tactics Mississippi used to leapfrog us in early literacy.

BTW, someone might ask Francesca Hong about this. She was one of only four Democrats that voted for this legislation before it was vetoed.

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In 2020, Law school student now attorney McKenna Kohlenberg wrote a paper titled “Booked, but can’t read (Madison): functional literacy, National citizenship and the new face of Dred Scott in the age of mass incarceration”. A remarkable work. One of her findings: “Prison planners use third-grade reading scores to predict the number of future beds needed.”

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Duey Stroebel’s 2023 quote

Slide 15

June, 2026. The newly appointed Director of Literacy at the Wisconsin DPI said in the Cap Times that: Wisconsin will see impacts of Act 20 (July 2023) on test scores within **six to eight years** based on what she has observed in other states.

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What to do? << pause >>

Slide 17

Mark Seidenberg, who many say is the father of the “Science of Reading” is a retired UW-Madison neuroscientist. Mark and I have worked on a few things over the decades, most recently with Molly Farry-Thorn and my wife Nancy, spent a great deal of time the past few years creating Fast Lane Literacy.

Our goals: Effective, Fast, easy to Use, For Anyone, No Training Required. 15 minutes per day.

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Fast Lane Literacy teaches patterns. English is weird, why is said said, not sAd, like paid? I think of pattern training as embedding the English algorithm in the learner’s brain as soon as possible. Compare to teach & kill.

Slide 19

Word morphing. Make sat, sit, pit, pat, hat, hit, by using fun magnetic wood tiles. People love the magnets and they mostly avoid the lost part problem. This approach is also easier for the learner to quickly master. Some products require the student to write letters AND move them around, which is difficult.

We do everything we can to help students lift off quickly and feel a sense of accomplishment. Kids crack the code quickly vs every trying to master every single letter.

Slide 20

Beautiful cards. Visual. Fun to start and practice. Dots indicate the # of letters in the word. A QR code on the back includes a video of the word's place in the world along with neighborhoods.

Slide 21

Team Reading. The student and instructor read sentences and phrases together, with the student speaking bold words and the instructor connector words.

Slide 22

Beautiful. Everything in one place. No need to get or print extra materials.

3 Steps: Get box. Open Box, start. The on-ramp to reading.

Slide 23

Get in, get out, quickly. Mark often says that if we can help them lift off fast, many other problems are solved.

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What can you do?

1. Share this early literacy data. This is the first time, as a result of Act 20, that we have public data on 4k to 3rd graders. Ask all elected officials about the results and what they are doing about it. I have asked the Madison Mayor. Her response: talk to the school board.
2. If you know of groups that would find this talk interesting, let me know. We would be happy to do this again and again and again.
3. If you know of people, or groups who could use a fast boost, you can buy Fast Lane Literacy and get the boxes to them. We are happy to meet with anyone, any time.
4. We've had people sponsor boxes and we then do our best to place them with students who need them.

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Keep in touch. We have an occasional newsletter. If interested, send an email to us@sedso.io and we'll add you to the list.

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There are a few things you should know. Dick noticed a decline in admitted University student skills. Thank you for your time today and I'm happy to take questions.