



# Wisconsin Virtual Academy: Building Strong Relationships for Academic Success

by Margaret Jorgensen, PhD, MBA, Chief Academic Officer, K12 Inc.  
and Leslye Moraski Erickson, PhD, Head of School, Wisconsin Virtual Academy

June 2015

Version 1.0



# Wisconsin Virtual Academy

---

Wisconsin Virtual Academy (WIVA), founded in 2003, is one of the pioneering institutions in the national network of online public schools managed by K12 Inc. WIVA has demonstrated that a community of educators, students, and families working together to build strong relationships can drive strong academic performance.

In this report, we begin by presenting an overview of academic performance at WIVA. After analyzing the academic data, we proceed to describe the school's focus on building relationships. In particular, WIVA has focused on building relationships between teachers and students to individualize the learning experience; relationships among teachers to share best practices in the virtual learning environment; and relationships among educators, both within WIVA and within the district, to address shared needs and goals.



# Academic Performance: A Brief Overview

---

Wisconsin Virtual Academy serves students in grades K–12. In 2013–2014, WIVA enrolled 1,945 students. Since 2011–2012, WIVA’s enrollment has increased by 189 percent. While rapid growth in enrollment presents challenges to educators committed to academic excellence, during this period of growth WIVA’s graduation rate increased 18.1 percentage points, and its school accountability rating increased 5.6 points, with WIVA earning a rating of “Meets Expectations” for the 2013–2014 school year.

## Comparing WIVA to State and District<sup>1</sup>

A review of state test data from the past three school years shows that, academically, WIVA has been a strong performer year over year, especially in Reading. We can compare the percentage of WIVA students scoring at or above proficiency on state tests to the percentages reported by the state and by the Racine Unified School District (demographically similar to WIVA<sup>2</sup>). Note that in 2012–2013, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction set new proficiency cut scores for state assessments in Reading and Mathematics.

- In Reading, across the past three school years and in all grades tested (3–8), WIVA students outperformed the Racine Unified School District. With the single exception of grade 5 in 2011–2012, WIVA students outperformed the state. (See Table 1.)
- In English Language Arts, across the past three school years and in both grades tested (4 and 8), WIVA students outperformed the Racine Unified School District. Compared to the state, WIVA students’ performance is varied. (See Table 2.)

<sup>1</sup> States and school districts generally report assessment results only for students who are categorized as Full Academic Year (FAY), which means that the students were enrolled on or before a cutoff date typically very close to the beginning of the school year. In comparing WIVA scores to those of the state and district, we report FAY data only and limit our analysis to WIVA students enrolled on or before the state’s FAY cutoff date.

<sup>2</sup> To understand the performance of a K<sup>12</sup>-managed school in context, we compare the school’s performance to that of a school district that (1) has an enrollment equal to or greater than that of the K<sup>12</sup> school, and (2) within a range of 15 percentage points (plus or minus) matches the K<sup>12</sup> school’s percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and the percentage of students eligible for special education services. In 2013–2014, Racine Unified SD’s enrollment was 20,301, with 65.2% eligible for FRL (compared to 57% at WIVA) and 18% eligible for special education services (compared to 14% at WIVA). Source: 2014 District Report Card, <https://apps2.dpi.wi.gov/reportcards/>

- In Mathematics, across the past three school years with the exception of grades 4 and 5 in 2011-2012, WIVA students outperformed the Racine Unified School District. In 2013-2014, WIVA students outperformed the district in grade 5, while in other grades the gap between WIVA and the district ranged from 3 to 14 percentage points. (See Table 3.) In most grades, WIVA students performed below the state.

**TABLE 1: PERCENTAGE AT OR ABOVE PROFICIENCY ON WISCONSIN STATE TEST IN READING**

	2011-2012 %AAP			2012-2013 %AAP			2013-2014 %AAP		
	WIVA	Racine Unified	STATE	WIVA	Racine Unified	STATE	WIVA	Racine Unified	STATE
Grade 3	66%	21%	33%	49%	20%	35%	46%	21%	35%
Grade 4	39%	22%	35%	57%	21%	33%	46%	25%	36%
Grade 5	29%	22%	33%	45%	21%	35%	52%	22%	34%
Grade 6	50%	22%	36%	46%	19%	35%	40%	21%	37%
Grade 7	52%	27%	39%	43%	24%	37%	43%	22%	38%
Grade 8	51%	22%	33%	53%	29%	40%	41%	22%	34%

%AAP=percentage at or above proficiency

**TABLE 2: PERCENTAGE AT OR ABOVE PROFICIENCY ON WISCONSIN STATE TEST IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS**

	2011-2012 %AAP			2012-2013 %AAP			2013-2014 %AAP		
	WIVA	Racine Unified	STATE	WIVA	Racine Unified	STATE	WIVA	Racine Unified	STATE
Grade 4	71%	68%	77%	81%	67%	75%	76%	64%	76%
Grade 8	69%	49%	64%	60%	46%	61%	52%	48%	63%

**TABLE 3: PERCENTAGE AT OR ABOVE PROFICIENCY ON WISCONSIN STATE TEST IN MATHEMATICS**

	2011-2012 %AAP			2012-2013 %AAP			2013-2014 %AAP		
	WIVA	Racine Unified	STATE	WIVA	Racine Unified	STATE	WIVA	Racine Unified	STATE
Grade 3	79%	38%	51%	42%	35%	48%	41%	34%	50%
Grade 4	33%	34%	52%	71%	35%	49%	46%	36%	52%
Grade 5	34%	34%	52%	48%	33%	51%	52%	30%	51%
Grade 6	40%	24%	46%	37%	28%	52%	44%	23%	47%
Grade 7	32%	27%	48%	36%	24%	47%	34%	25%	48%
Grade 8	47%	26%	45%	34%	24%	45%	39%	25%	46%

In high school, Wisconsin administers the Wisconsin Knowledge Concepts Exam to all students in grade 10.

- In the grade 10 tests of Reading and Language Arts, WIVA achieved higher percentages of students at or above proficiency than the Racine Unified School District. Compared to the average proficiency percentages reported by the state, WIVA outperformed the state in Reading in 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 but not in 2013-2014. (See Table 4.)
- In the grade 10 test of Mathematics, WIVA outperformed the Racine Unified School District in 2012-2013 but not in 2011-2012 or 2013-2014. The state outperformed WIVA in Mathematics in all three school years. (See Table 4.)

**TABLE 4. WIVA HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION PERFORMANCE FOR GRADE 10 STUDENTS**

	2011-2012 %AAP			2012-2013 %AAP			2013-2014 %AAP		
	WIVA	Racine	STATE	WIVA	Racine	STATE	WIVA	Racine	STATE
Reading	74%	59.9%	42%	57%	23.0%	36%	36%	29.8%	42%
Language Arts	77%	48.6%	70%	74%	55.9%	73%	65%	55.0%	71%
Mathematics	38%	46.1%	44%	41%	21.1%	44%	21%	25.8%	46%



# Economically Disadvantaged Students Grow Stronger over Time

---

In the 2013–2014 school year, of the more than 1,900 students enrolled in WIVA, 57% were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL), a higher percentage than the national average of 50% FRL eligibility reported by National Center for Education Statistics in 2013.<sup>3</sup> For decades, research studies have repeatedly shown that the academic performance of economically disadvantaged students lags behind that of their more economically advantaged classmates. One way to examine WIVA’s academic effectiveness is to focus on how the school is meeting the needs of its economically disadvantaged students.

---

In particular, we can examine the relationship between persistence—defined here as the length of continuous enrollment in a K<sup>12</sup>-managed school—and performance on state tests by FRL-eligible students. The critical question is this: Do economically disadvantaged students make academic progress as they remain continuously enrolled at WIVA?

The following data<sup>4</sup> demonstrate that WIVA’s FRL-eligible students grow academically stronger as they remain enrolled longer, especially in Reading.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/elsi/>, accessed 01/09/15

<sup>4</sup> The remainder of this report is not limited to *FAY* (Full Academic Year) students but instead includes data for all WIVA students who were tested and for whom valid test results were available in a given school year, regardless of enrollment date.

<sup>5</sup> Regarding persistence data from K<sup>12</sup>-managed public schools, there is no evidence that students who remain longer entered as higher-performing students.

## Reading

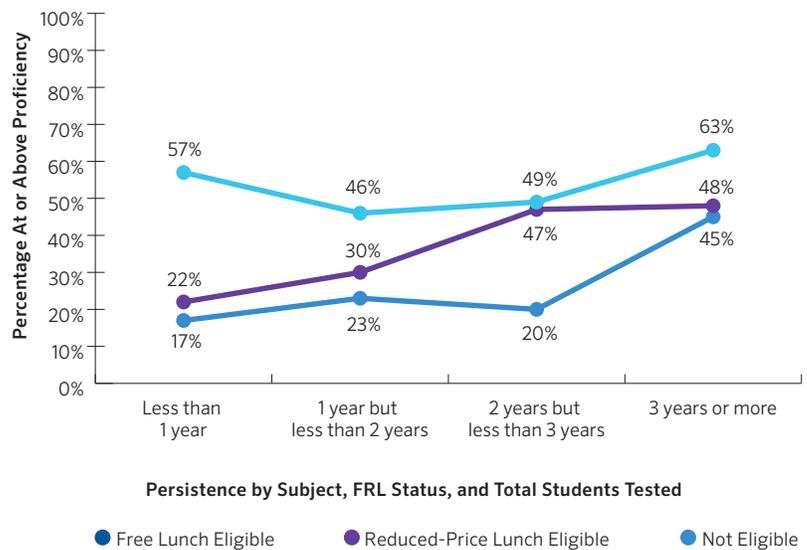
- In Reading, compared to students enrolled less than 1 year, WIVA's FRL-eligible students enrolled 3 years or more achieved higher proficiency percentages in all FRL groups. (See Table 5 and Figure 1.)
- The gap between Reduced-Price Lunch Eligible students and Not Eligible students narrowed from 35 percentage points for students enrolled less than 1 year to 18 percentage points for students enrolled 3 years or more.
- The gap between Free Lunch Eligible students and Not Eligible students narrowed from 40 percentage points for students enrolled less than 1 year to 15 percentage points for students enrolled 3 years or more.

**TABLE 5: WIVA READING: FRL + PERSISTENCE COMPARISON**

Reading: Students enrolled 3 years or more compared to students enrolled less than 1 year	
FRL Group	%AAP: Increase or Decrease (in percentage points)
Free Lunch Eligible	+31
Reduced-Price Lunch Eligible	+23
Not Eligible	+6

%AAP = percentage at or above proficiency

**FIGURE 1: WIVA READING: FRL + PERSISTENCE**



**Total Student Count Per Category**

	Free Lunch Eligible	Reduced-Price Lunch Eligible	Not Eligible
Less than 1 year	64	18	23
1 year but less than 2 years	167	50	120
2 years but less than 3 years	60	30	94
3 years or more	44	31	84

## Mathematics

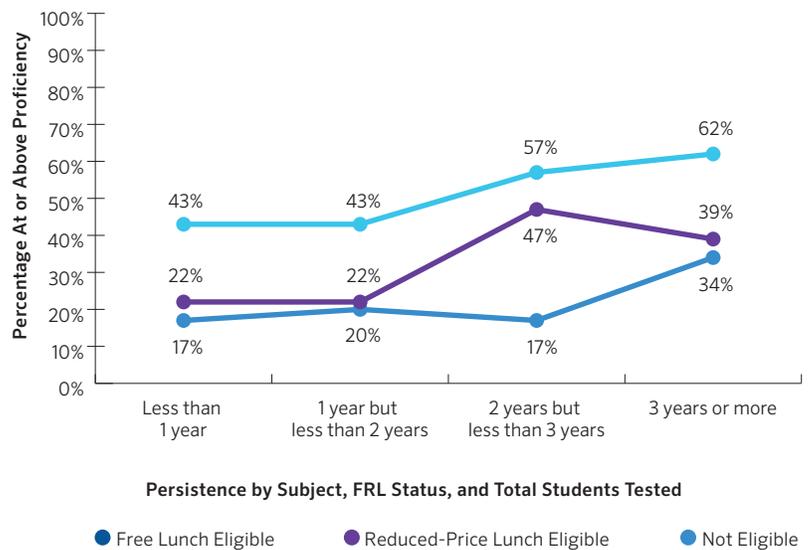
- In Mathematics, compared to students enrolled less than 1 year, WIVA students enrolled 3 years or more achieved higher proficiency percentages in all FRL groups. (See Table 6 and Figure 2.)

**TABLE 6: WIVA MATHEMATICS: FRL + PERSISTENCE COMPARISON**

Mathematics: Students enrolled 3 years or more compared to students enrolled less than 1 year	
FRL Group	%AAP: Increase or Decrease (in percentage points)
Free Lunch Eligible	+17
Reduced-Price Lunch Eligible	+17
Not Eligible	+19

%AAP = percentage at or above proficiency

**FIGURE 2: WIVA MATHEMATICS: FRL + PERSISTENCE**



**Total Student Count Per Category**

	Free Lunch Eligible	Reduced-Price Lunch Eligible	Not Eligible
Less than 1 year	64	18	23
1 year but less than 2 years	167	50	120
2 years but less than 3 years	60	30	94
3 years or more	44	31	84

## Relationships That Support Learning at WIVA

When asked what has contributed to academic success at WIVA, the school’s leadership team emphasized the importance of building strong relationships. The school culture at WIVA is built on strong relationships that connect

- teachers with each other
- teachers with students
- the school with families, and
- the school with the district.

### Teachers Supporting Teachers

As WIVA’s Head of School, Dr. Leslye Moraski Erickson values the strong collaboration and teamwork at WIVA. She actively recruits and hires teachers she describes as “collaborative in spirit.”

WIVA teachers build strong professional relationships through their shared emphasis on setting clear goals, keeping track of student performance data, and delivering student-specific intervention. WIVA teachers, following the principles of data-driven instruction, meet frequently to review student performance data. In these meetings, they discuss each student’s individual needs and then adjust their instructional plans accordingly. In “best practices” chats, they also share information and experiences about effective strategies and approaches.

WIVA teachers also support each other through mentorship programs. At WIVA, the most experienced and effective teachers serving as instructional coaches to ensure that best practices are implemented appropriately in the virtual learning environment. Instructional coaches observe and guide less experienced colleagues, and share best practices across teaching teams. As mentors, WIVA’s instructional coaches support their colleagues’ professional growth and development, which pays dividends in stronger academic performance by students.

### Connecting with Students and Families

Teachers at WIVA also build strong relationships with their students. In grades K-8, students attend live virtual synchronous sessions with their teachers and peers at least twice a week. Teachers in all grades regularly use online tools for small group and individualized instruction, especially as a part of remediation support or to encourage student collaboration and teamwork.

WIVA also builds strong relationships with families. For example, in order to help students and families facing non-academic challenges, WIVA has implemented an initiative known as FAST (Family Academic Support Team). FAST members work

to overcome social or emotional obstacles that may prevent a student from fully engaging with learning. WIVA’s FAST members offer counseling or connect families with specific community resources as needed. By building relationships with families in need of extra support, WIVA helps students overcome non-academic obstacles and get back on the path to academic success.

### Partnering with the District

WIVA administrators maintain a close working relationship with the McFarland School District, the school’s authorizing district. Leaders at WIVA and McFarland understand that a true partnership is necessary to help students succeed. This partnership spans a wide variety of topics, from enrollment processes to special education compliance, with collaboration focused on improving the student experience and promoting academic success.

McFarland district leaders remain engaged in key WIVA activities such as staff professional development. WIVA’s Head of School regularly meets with the district superintendent, and annually reviews school challenges, successes, and performance with the McFarland Board of Education.

## Looking Forward

While strong relationships are helping to strengthen academic performance at Wisconsin Virtual Academy, the school is not content with the status quo. School leaders know that, among students turning to WIVA, many are seeking solutions to the problems they faced in their previous brick-and-mortar learning environment. Knowing this, WIVA’s leaders understand the need to focus on building support systems to help these struggling students overcome obstacles and achieve to their maximum potential.

Current initiatives include the addition of “homeroom teachers” at the high school level as another way to build strong relationships—with the teacher serving as a caring adult who can offer both the support and the high expectations needed for academic achievement. In the primary grades, WIVA teachers are working to place a stronger emphasis on kindergarten and first-grade readiness skills that students need to master in order to build strong foundations for later success. In all grades, WIVA administrators and teachers are intent on building even stronger relationships between the school and the family member serving as the Learning Coach.

Indeed, WIVA leaders fully intend to continue building and extending the network of strong relationships that has contributed so much to the school’s success to date.