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DISTRICTS RANKED — ELEMENTARY TO HIGH SCHOOL

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Milwaukee

MAGAZINE

BEST SCHOOLS

BY MATT HRODEY



WHY IS WHITEFISH BAY HIGH SCHOOL SO EXCITED? ➔ PAGE 44

THE ZEN
RADIO DJ
BY KURT CHANDLER

BREAKING GROUND
WITH BARRY MANDEL
BY JOHN RONDY

Julie King had a student who was afraid of her own ideas.

The girl was “very shy, someone who had struggled in school up to that point,” says the reading specialist at Steffen Middle School in the Mequon-Thiensville School District. Like other students, the sixth-grader had been sent to King for extra help.

Something about writing her ideas down and leaving them vulnerable to judgment unsettled the student, and she was now reluctantly creating an outline for what would later become an essay.

“Then we took that permanence away,” says King, who had the student write her ideas on sticky notes and then place them on the form she was using to write the outline. One by one, the girl organized the little pieces of paper.

“We talked about what didn’t fit,” says the specialist, who asked the student, “Does that fit in that paragraph? No? Let’s take it out.”

Discarded ideas accumulated on the table. Then the student noticed where they could fit, and the outline grew. The exercise became a breakthrough for the young writer.

In *Milwaukee Magazine’s* new study of Best Schools, King’s district ranked as the Best Overall K-12 District, a category that took into account scores on the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination (WKCE) standardized test that’s administered to elementary, middle and high school students. It also factored in ACT and Advanced Placement test results, indicators of college readiness.

Of the 33 Milwaukee-area K-12 districts studied, several others boasted similarly high scores, including Whitefish Bay, our No. 1 Top Scorer in the high school category, as well as Elmbrook, Germantown, Cedarburg and Greendale.

Asked why their districts excel, administrators tout various programs and initiatives, each slightly different in approach.

At Mequon-Thiensville, Superintendent

Demond Means points to the district’s fixation on developing literacy – the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening – in all content areas, even math.

“It’s the engine that drives our curriculum,” he says. “We ask kids to express themselves in writing in every subject.”

For some five years, the high-scoring district has placed reading specialists – specially certified teachers armed with advanced skills in literacy intervention – at each of its three elementary and two middle schools.

“We follow a systematic approach,” says Heidi Pergande, the Donges Bay Elementary specialist. “It takes about 10 years to become what we consider a proficient reader.” The process typically runs from ages 5 to 15.

“We like to say we are preventing reading deficiencies instead of alleviating them,” she says.

Mequon-Thiensville, like some other districts in Wisconsin, is adding more nonfiction books and articles to its curriculum, partly to get more boys engrossed in reading. Anna Young, the Lake Shore Middle School specialist, says boys are often more interested in real-life subject matter.

Recently, while reading such a book with a small group of boys, she noticed something unusual out of the corner of her eye. “I could see on my sides,” she says, “that these young men were peeling back the pages and looking ahead.”

That’s the X-factor: student interest. “It’s magic,” she says. “It’s this magic thing.”

It’s present at younger ages, too, according to Pergande. “Boys rush into the library to the snakes and the lizards and the motor-cycles.”

But districts are also teaching more nonfiction because it improves reading comprehension, she says. “Nonfiction demands more of the reader, and you have to be more sophisticated in your approach to it.”

Knowing when to leave kids alone is also an important part of a reading specialist’s

job, they say. Tara Webster, the Oriole Lane Elementary specialist, says it took until her second year of teaching (she started out teaching second grade) to “learn to sit back and let the kids read.”

The results could be astonishing. Sometimes, she says, “You could hear a pin drop.”



If two seniors at Whitefish Bay High School have their way, the surgical device used to measure your rotator cuff tear – or your child’s tear after a surprise sports injury – will have been designed by a couple of 18-year-olds.

The two, Thomas Bihler and Austin Middleton, devised the device in an engineering design class that’s part of the Project Lead the Way (PLTW) curriculum. The program – named for the Indianapolis-based nonprofit that develops the science, math and engineering coursework – is the pride and joy of Whitefish Bay High School and helped secure that No. 1 ranking among our High School Top Scorers.

This rankings factored in WKCE, ACT and Advanced Placement test results, meaning Whitefish Bay’s 2011 composite ACT score of 26.6, the best among public schools in the five-county Milwaukee area and a new school record, gave it a big boost.

Superintendent Mary Gavigan credits the district’s success to a culture of high expectations, an appetite for data, and the work of teachers and parents. “But we cannot stop improving and rest on our laurels,” she says.

The district faces stiff competition from Mequon-Thiensville, Elmbrook, Shorewood and Cedarburg, which also ranked as High School Top Scorers.

Part of Whitefish Bay’s ravenous approach to self-improvement is seen in its PLTW classes, where students learn computer modeling, bioengineering and other real-life skills. In Bihler and Middleton’s class – the apex of the engineering track – students design and prototype a product to solve an as-of-yet unsolved problem.

“That’s really something we’ve not asked students to do before,” says Judy Weiss, a PLTW teacher. “In science, we’re usually just showing students something somebody has already figured out.”

Trained in metallurgy, Weiss’ professional life began in Warren, Mich., where she worked as a process engineer for General Motors. Later, she moved to Milwaukee and



LITERACY LESSON

For Mequon-Thiensville's Julie King, teaching reading is a royal passion.

managed quality assurance departments in foundries throughout southeastern Wisconsin, getting laid off twice. Next, she got a teaching certificate through a post-baccalaureate program at UW-Milwaukee.

Stepping into her first classroom at an MPS middle school, she thought, "Yep, this is it. This is what I should have been doing 20 years ago." At Whitefish Bay High School, Weiss is uniquely suited to teach students like Bihler and Middleton, who happens to be the son of an orthopedic surgeon.

While the two were brainstorming last fall, Middleton's father mentioned that the severity of a rotator cuff tendon tear, a daunting sports injury, is notoriously tough to measure. The tear's length determines the best surgical procedure.

The two students surveyed about 40 orthopedic surgeons locally and nationally. About 84 percent said they sometimes guess at whether a tear has crossed a critical threshold, whether 50 percent or more of the connective tissue is torn.

"You would think a couple high school kids couldn't add something to the surgical world," Bihler says, "but we realized this was being swept under the rug."

The Bihler and Middleton design

measures tendon tears using a pair of needles. One is inserted through the full width of the tendon, and the other, to provide a comparison, stops at the tear's beginning.

Earlier this year, the two students were even battling around the idea of applying for a patent. Could they sell the idea? They weren't sure. "Going into this, I had little to no knowledge of surgical equipment," Middleton says. "We thought we were going to figure out something that would take the dents out of pingpong balls."



On Highway 16, after it curves past Pewaukee Lake but before it morphs into Oconomowoc's main drag, there's a cluster of school districts serving grades K-8. Three of them – Richmond, Swallow and Lake Country – topped our rankings of K-8 Top Scorers.

Each district has a single school that houses all grades under one roof. The terrain surrounding each is not quite rural but not densely suburban, either. And yet, miles from the busier streets of Oconomowoc or Brookfield, something special is happening: On average, at least 95 percent of students in

these schools are scoring proficient or higher on the WKCE math and reading tests.

Take Richmond School, our No. 1 K-8 Top Scorer. Of its 300 students who took the WKCE reading test in the 2010-11 school year, almost 99 percent (about 296 out of 300) scored as proficient or better. A typical percentage for a district in the Milwaukee suburbs is in the low 90s.

At Richmond, construction paper robots and other typical student projects line the halls, but look closer, and you'll notice a grid of six squares that reappears in poster after poster. The squares are labeled Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis and Evaluation, the same divisions that run through the school's demanding "thinking skills" curriculum.

In these assignments, students are given a topic, such as Rosa Parks or the Civil War, to tackle using each of these six categories. For "sound," one fourth-grader wrote, "When matter vibrates, a sound happens." Comprehension. The student also noted that, "I can compare sound to feelings." Analysis. And, "I can support sound because it can be nice." Evaluation.

The district rolled out the program,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 72



HOW WE DID THE STUDY

FINDING A WAY to rank 33 K-12 and 21 K-8 school districts in the five-county Milwaukee area isn't easy, so we came up with three.

The first, our Top Scorers (below), followed a more traditional path. We ranked the K-8 performance of all 54 districts based on their standardized test scores, those from the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination (WKCE). To evaluate high schools, we factored in indicators of college readiness - ACT scores and the percentage of students scoring 3 or higher on Advanced Placement tests.

Our second methodology, used in The Big Picture on Page 50, identifies some of the area's most well-rounded school systems. This ranking places equal emphasis on elementary and high school scores and incorporates all of the variables used to rank our K-8 and High School Top Scorers.

The third and final approach, on Page 52, produced Overperformers and Underperform-

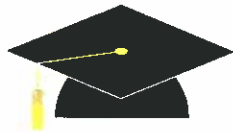
ers. We quantified the close relationship between poverty and student achievement seen in area test scores and ranked districts based on whether they beat or trailed the trend.

In more technical terms, the statistical model at the ranking's core is a linear regression with a dependent variable of WKCE math and reading scores and an independent variable of the percentage of students receiving free or reduced price lunch, an indicator of poverty. Schools were ranked based on their residuals, their deviation from the model.

In all rankings, we frequently used three-year averages of the most recent data available. For example, we drew WKCE math and reading scores from the three school years spanning fall 2008 through spring 2011.

We didn't include Milwaukee Public Schools and the Racine Unified School District. Their large size and high poverty rates make them difficult to compare to other area districts.

TOP SCORERS



These districts post some impressive results. For K-8, we ranked area districts based on standardized test scores in math and reading. For high schools, we also factored in ACT and Advanced Placement test scores.

High School

1. WHITEFISH BAY
2. MEQUON-THIENSVILLE
3. ELMBROOK
4. SHOREWOOD
5. CEDARBURG
6. GERMANTOWN
7. HAMILTON
8. GREENDALE
9. NEW BERLIN
10. KETTLE MORAINÉ

K-8

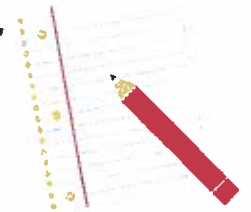
1. RICHMOND
2. SWALLOW
3. LAKE COUNTRY
4. MERTON COMMUNITY
5. MEQUON-THIENSVILLE
6. GREENDALE
7. NORTH CAPE
8. GERMANTOWN
9. NORTH LAKE
10. RICHFIELD J1



MATT HRODEY DISCUSSES THIS STORY ON WUWM'S "LAKE EFFECT" APRIL 4 AT 10 A.M.

THE BIG PICTURE

Our Best Overall K-12 District tops this ranking of 33 K-12 districts in which K-8 and high school performance matter equally. We factored in standardized test scores, ACT results and AP test scores.



Rank	School District	Spending Per Pupil	Student-to-Teacher Ratio (2010-11)	Enrollment (2010-11)	Lunch Assistance Percentage	Grades 3-8 Reading (WKCE)	Grades 3-8 Math (WKCE)	Grade 10 Reading (WKCE)
1	MEQUON-THIENSVILLE	\$11,410	14.4	3,696	7.20	95.56	95.29	89.63
2	WHITEFISH BAY	\$11,276	13.7	2,989	0.17	94.09	93.33	93.90
3	ELMBROOK	\$11,490	13.1	7,212	9.63	94.20	94.14	91.57
4	GERMANTOWN	\$9,918	14	4,034	11.87	94.65	94.83	92.13
5	CEDARBURG	\$10,063	14.3	3,028	7.27	95.50	91.81	94.57
6	GREENDALE	\$11,349	14.3	2,699	18.10	95.59	94.18	89.53
7	HAMILTON	\$9,577	14.9	4,600	10.73	93.99	93.93	90.63
8	SHOREWOOD	\$12,171	14.2	2,010	15.13	93.58	91.46	89.87
9	NEW BERLIN	\$10,019	15	4,687	9.77	92.88	92.98	89.97
10	KETTLE MORAINE	\$9,956	15.2	4,367	7.80	93.05	92.05	90.00
11	MUKWONAGO	\$9,362	14.8	4,955	10.33	93.80	92.89	90.13
12	MUSKEGO-NORWAY	\$10,067	16.1	5,068	8.17	92.45	90.60	88.40
13	PEWAUKEE	\$10,336	14.8	2,493	10.87	92.93	93.66	80.90
14	GRAFTON	\$10,782	12.6	2,199	14.23	94.17	92.16	85.33
15	SLINGER	\$9,243	16	2,949	12.17	94.49	92.40	87.13
16	FRANKLIN PUBLIC	\$10,886	14.5	4,300	10.27	93.83	92.91	86.20
17	OCONOMOWOC AREA	\$9,718	15	5,044	14.27	91.69	90.79	83.70
18	MENOMONEE FALLS	\$10,863	13.8	4,411	14.93	93.14	91.72	83.37
19	WHITNALL	\$10,095	15	2,322	15.17	90.96	89.38	86.53
20	PORT WASHINGTON-SAUKVILLE	\$10,521	14.2	2,700	20.53	91.58	86.04	87.27
21	WAUWATOSA	\$9,984	13.2	7,208	14.77	89.98	88.74	83.00
22	WEST BEND	\$9,285	14.8	6,958	28.77	88.53	86.27	81.03
23	OAK CREEK-FRANKLIN	\$8,888	14.6	6,146	18.40	88.26	81.25	83.90
24	BURLINGTON AREA	\$10,224	13.8	3,504	29.23	85.69	80.72	79.93
25	WAUKESHA	\$10,148	14.8	13,793	27.10	84.68	78.60	78.00
26	NORTHERN OZAUKEE	\$10,218	17.5	1,500	15.17	87.98	78.98	80.70
27	KEWASKUM	\$9,432	14.4	1,980	17.00	87.43	86.97	77.93
28	SOUTH MILWAUKEE	\$10,363	14.4	3,348	36.50	86.63	79.36	82.63
29	GREENFIELD	\$9,459	16.4	3,723	31.43	86.97	79.53	77.37
30	WEST ALLIS-WEST MILWAUKEE	\$10,734	12.9	8,976	47.70	83.08	79.14	75.97
31	BROWN DEER	\$12,115	13.1	1,718	30.90	80.67	79.66	70.97
32	CUDAHY	\$11,431	12.4	2,669	45.03	82.72	74.60	72.70
33	ST. FRANCIS	\$10,921	14.2	1,276	33.10	80.84	78.83	64.90

EXTRA CREDIT

ADVANCED PLACEMENT COURSES often offer a leg up for students entering college. Taught in high school, these college-level courses can turn into college credits come freshman year. But not all high schools are created equally when it comes to offerings.

According to data from the 2009-10 school year (the most recent available), some districts have few AP courses, including West Allis, where only three are taught, while others teach a plethora, such as Elmbrook, where students enjoy 21 options. Popular courses include biology, U.S. history and calculus. Upon completion of these courses, students take a test administered by the College Board organization, which is also responsible for the SAT. Score high enough on the test, and you're one step closer to the college degree you've yet to officially start.

Several area K-12 districts also offer Cooperative Academic Partnership Program (CAPP) classes, a homegrown alternative run by UW-Oshkosh. The university certifies high school teachers to teach college classes in their schools, and passing students receive UW System credits.

AFTER-SCHOOL ALL STARS ★★★

Extracurricular activities give students a chance to meet new friends, pursue personal interests and develop special skills - be it public speaking, running a fast 40-yard dash or soloing on the trombone. But offerings by area districts vary widely, according to our analysis of data collected by the state Department of Public Instruction.

The department defines extracurriculars as "school-sanctioned activities intended to broaden, develop and enhance a student's school experience in the areas of academics, athletics and music," and districts report their average offerings per school in each category.

The South Milwaukee School District is perhaps the biggest After-School All Star, ranking first in the academic category (among 33 area K-12 districts) with 37 offerings per school, second in athletics with another 37 and

third in music with 11. "We've taken a funding hit like everybody else, but we've really tried to protect athletics and music and keep the clubs going," says Superintendent Rita Olson. "In some cases, we rely on volunteers, and a number of teachers are leading clubs without compensation."

Cudahy was tops in sports, offering about 39 different extracurriculars per school, and Waukesha can toot its horn with 13 distinct music activities, the most in the area. Props are also due to Mequon-Thiensville, which ranked third in both the athletic and academic categories with 35 and 22, respectively.

Northern Ozaukee offered the fewest academic extracurriculars (about five). Mukwonago took the bottom slot in athletics (about eight), with much-larger Waukesha a close second (about nine). Slinger was last in music with just one reported activity. On average, area districts offer about five times as many athletic activities as musical ones. All data is from the 2009-10 school year, the most recent available.

Grade 10 Math (WKCE)	ACT Composite	AP Test Scores (3+)	AP Course Offerings (2009-10)	Athletic Offerings (2009-10)
88.83	25.60	87.13	15	35
88.67	26.13	87.97	15	19
89.67	24.80	86.60	21	17
89.33	23.53	81.23	7	17.5
87.93	24.30	81.03	10	33
88.13	23.97	81.00	14	18.5
86.80	23.63	84.27	10	17
86.93	25.17	83.47	10	20.7
90.60	24.07	74.17	12	9.7
90.63	24.03	71.83	13	20.5
85.00	23.50	71.67	5	7.5
86.67	23.53	76.87	10	10.7
83.27	23.13	78.03	13	17.5
78.60	23.83	73.20	6	27.5
87.97	23.30	63.13	4	11.5
81.77	22.73	69.30	13	17.5
81.47	22.57	75.77	4	28.7
80.93	22.87	68.13	11	21.5
81.27	22.70	75.73	9	15
81.00	23.17	74.03	14	26.5
78.77	23.80	74.10	12	24.5
77.20	22.90	63.53	8	18.3
76.13	21.87	66.00	13	19.3
75.07	22.17	73.97	2	13.7
73.20	22.90	73.07	12	8.8
68.50	22.57	66.97	13	9
75.83	20.90	41.40	4	19
75.17	21.67	47.13	6	37
69.13	20.87	58.10	4	13.5
67.27	21.73	61.60	3	12.6
68.10	20.97	51.60	7	13
65.70	21.40	48.87	5	39.4
62.97	20.70	36.23	5	9



AGAINST THE ODDS

Even with higher levels of poverty, several area districts continue to perform well.

When Stacey Futh taught at a Milwaukee Public Schools elementary school, "The doors were shut," she says. Teachers collaborated little, if at all. She didn't even feel comfortable asking a colleague for help.

Then, about six years ago, she took a job at Park View Elementary, a small school in the Cudahy School District that, like her former MPS school, serves many students from impoverished families.

But here, Futh says, "I can go to another teacher." Now a fourth-grade instructor, she's found a welcome sense of trust and respect, and the results, in her classroom and in others, are plainly visible in the school's standardized test scores, which rival those from more affluent schools.

In this year's ranking of Milwaukee-area schools, we're offering a second approach that considers a district's poverty level, as measured by the percentage of students receiving reduced-price lunch, alongside its Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination scores. The result is an alternative ranking that identifies districts making the most of the cards they've been dealt.

Cudahy is one of these districts: It placed fourth out of 33 K-12 districts in high school performance and 11th out of 54 districts in K-8 performance.

Leaders in many of these overperforming districts say frequent collaboration between teachers is critical to their success. At the West Allis-West Milwaukee School District, the top Overperformer in high school and K-8 performance, teachers meet for 40 to 50 minutes at the beginning of each

school day to swap notes and strategize, says Superintendent Kurt Wachholz.

Leaders also point, as in other districts, to data. But in impoverished districts, data is especially key because of how it can pinpoint deficiencies. Our study found, as countless others have, a close correlation between poverty and student achievement. As poverty rises, scores tend to decline.

According to William Vélez, a professor of educational sociology at UW-Milwaukee, children in impoverished families tend to score lower because they are more likely to live with single parents or have limited access to computers and a quiet place to work. "If you have five siblings crammed into a two-bedroom apartment, where are you going to study?" he notes.

West Allis-West Milwaukee relies heavily on data, Wachholz says, administering Measures of Academic Progress testing three times a year. The WKCE, he says, "tells us some things, but it doesn't drive learning." Teachers need more frequent updates, he says, than those provided by the WKCE. Schools typically receive the results in April with summer rapidly approaching.

The Greendale School District ranked third among high schools and second in K-8. Like West Allis, it relies on a bevy of assessments. "Everybody talks about doing data analysis," says Superintendent William Hughes, "but we're good at it. We don't get lost in the data. We find the gaps and zero in." Greendale also offers a range of summer school programs for its students, something Vélez notes is often out of reach for students living

OVER/UNDER

This ranking relies on a statistical model that compares districts only to those of similar economic standing. Overperformers rise above the trend of higher poverty leading to lower scores. Underperformers sink below it.

High School

OVERPERFORMERS

1. WEST ALLIS
2. SOUTH MILWAUKEE
3. GREENDALE
4. CUDAHY
5. GERMANTOWN
6. SHOREWOOD
7. WEST BEND

UNDERPERFORMERS

1. NORTHERN OZAUKEE
2. ST. FRANCIS
3. KEWASKUM
4. PEWAUKEE
5. BROWN DEER
6. WAUWATOSA
7. FRANKLIN PUBLIC

K-8

OVERPERFORMERS

1. WEST ALLIS
2. GREENDALE
3. NORTH LAKE
4. NORTH CAPE
5. WEST BEND
6. HARTFORD J1
7. GERMANTOWN

UNDERPERFORMERS

1. NORTHERN OZAUKEE
2. YORKVILLE J2
3. RAYMOND #14
4. GLENDALE-RIVER HILLS
5. OAK CREEK-FRANKLIN
6. WHITEFISH BAY
7. WAUKESHA

in poverty. Provided at a minimal cost, the program is wildly popular. About half of Greendale High School's 950 students participated last summer, according to Kim Amidzich, the district's director of assessment and learning.

In the Germantown School District, which placed fifth among high schools, Superintendent Susan Borden says the district tracks not just WKCE and MAP test scores but also a variety of demographics, including gender and socio-economic data. "We work very hard to meet students where they are," she says.

Some school administrators, however, objected to this alternative method for ranking districts, saying, for instance, that their schools cope with high levels of mobility. John Thomsen, superintendent at the St. Francis School District, says some of its lowest scores come from students who have spent less than 18 months in the district.

Other school officials argue that the WKCE is a limited measure of a school's success. Deb Kerr, superintendent at the Brown Deer School District, says the measure is particularly narrow in the high school category, which uses scores from 10th-graders, the only year when high school students take the test.

And Larry Smalley, superintendent at the K-8 Glendale-River Hills School District, suggested including race in the model alongside poverty. African-American students in the district, he says, tend to score lower, even those not living in poverty. "I have some high-affluence African-American males in my district, and some of them still don't do as well."

PRIVATE EYE ↓

Although our study primarily examined public schools, we also made an attempt to evaluate private ones.

Unlike their taxpayer-supported counterparts, area private high schools are not required to administer standardized tests or report assessment scores to state government. But a couple do post their ACT scores online. The University School of Milwaukee, a prestigious private K-12 school system located on a rural River Hills campus, reports (and confirmed for *Milwaukee Magazine*) an average composite ACT score of 29.2 in 2011. Another private school, Marquette University High School, reports an average of 27.7. The highest such score among public school districts, 26.6, is found in Whitefish Bay.

We attempted to contact the nine other largest private high schools in the area - Pius XI High School, Wisconsin Lutheran High School, Milwaukee Lutheran High School, Messmer High School, Divine Savior Holy Angels High School, St. Thomas More High School, Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School, St. Catherine's High School and Martin Luther High School.

Only two responded to report average ACT scores: St. Catherine's High School, located in Racine, reported a score of 22.3 in 2011, and Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School in Jackson reported 24.3.

Others declined to provide theirs, including Pius XI High School in Milwaukee, the second-largest in enrollment behind Marquette University High School. "The quality of a school," says Melissa Douglas, Pius XI marketing and communications manager, "is way more than a test score."

THAT'S NOT ALL, FOLKS.

MORE SCHOOLS ON PAGE 72

ONLINE EXTRA!

See milwaukeeemag.com for our investigation of the area's largest virtual schools.



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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 47

created by education researchers Jim Curry and John Samara, about six years ago. Its results have surprised the district's own teachers, including kindergarten instructor Lisa Koeppen. Initially, she wondered if her

students could grasp the more advanced modes, such as "analysis."

"At first, you're thinking these kids aren't going to be able to do it," she says. "But they are."

In her class, kids build cars and other to-scale models out of K'NEX blocks. Then Koeppen asks them to compare (analytical thinking) their construction to another student's. Mine has four wheels, a student

might say, but yours only has three.

Sometimes, feelings get hurt. "But anytime students are having discussions, even arguments, and working through those problems, they're developing life skills," she says.

Richmond's kindergartners know the word *synthesis* and what it means, according to second-grade instructor Nancy Johnson, who trains other teachers to use Curry and Samara's methods.

Not long after the district incorporated them, she asked her students, who were working their way through a reading unit, to explain their favorite character and why. "Some of the kids I couldn't get to write anything about a story were writing pages that they then got up and presented," she says.

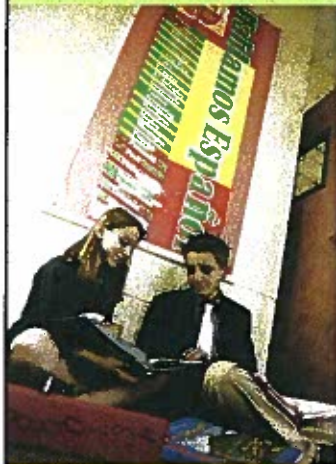
Johnson, like other teachers in the district, trained with Curry in 2006 when the expert held a series of two-day sessions at the school. His services cost about \$1,500 a day, Richmond Superintendent George Zimmer says. Johnson was singled out to become the school's resident coach.

Zimmer, who solicited the endorsements of the school board, other administrators and the teachers themselves before hiring Curry, says he first encountered the consultant while serving as principal of a middle school in the affluent Chicago-area suburb of Highland Park.

He attended a Curry training session where the instructional guru said, "Why make connections through curriculum when you can make them through thinking skills?" This remark, Zimmer says, "changed my life."

Like Richmond, the middle school's standardized test scores were already enviable, he says. "But we wanted them to be better."

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In 2007, when *Milwaukee Magazine* last ranked schools in the metro area, much of the chatter among district administrators surrounded "differentiated instruction," the sometimes-sophisticated practice of tailoring learning to fit the needs of individual students.

But today, "data" is on the tip of many area administrators' tongues. To differentiate, after all, you must know your students, their strengths and their weaknesses, according to Shorewood Superintendent Blane McCann, who's retiring in July after nine years in the district.

BEST SCHOOLS

He attributes the blossoming of data-led education to the rising popularity of the "Response to Intervention" system, a method for intervening early with struggling students. "You need that real-time data," he says, including tests scores, demographic indicators and school strategies.

In recent years, schools in the Milwaukee area and around the country have sought to become more nimble and evolve from what is now seen as the old, outdated approach of seating 25 to 30 students in neat rows and teaching them the same material in the same way on the same schedule.

Districts are adding Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) testing at a rapid clip, particularly in elementary grade levels. Students take the test two or three times a year, and school leaders use the results to



TEACHING STUDENTS THE SAME MATERIAL IN THE SAME WAY ON THE SAME SCHEDULE IS SEEN AS AN OUTDATED APPROACH.

tweak teaching strategies. "More than ever, people have recognized the need for a balanced assessment system," says Gavigan, superintendent of the Whitefish Bay School District. Her district added MAP testing in the 2011-12 school year and will expand it to additional grades this fall.

At Shorewood, which ranked fourth in the high school category, McCann says the district is building a comprehensive database that tracks each of its students. Administrators are also surveying parents, students and teachers to add "perceptual" data to the mix. The district wants to know what its stakeholders think about its strategies and budget priorities.

In the Elmbrook School District, another Top Scorer, students and schools are tracked closely. Each school follows a "continuous improvement" plan (a popular concept in business management) that holds teachers and school officials accountable. The challenge, says Superintendent Matt Gibson, who is also retiring this summer, "is connecting the plan to consistent deployment." The answer, when results fall short, is to "shore up, in a kind and gentle way." ■

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