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Contact: *Teri Battaglieri*
Great Lakes Center for Education and Practice
248-444-7071

William J. Mathis
University of Vermont
802-247-5757

Wisconsin Think Tank's Report on High School Learning Gaps Gets Two Fs for "Fatally Flawed"

EAST LANSING, Mich. — A new report by a Wisconsin think tank that examined "learning gaps" among high school students fails minimal academic standards and gets two Fs for being fatally flawed, found an independent review of the report conducted by the Think Twice Project.

Think Twice, operated by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice in East Lansing, Michigan, examined the methodology, analysis and conclusions of a new Wisconsin Policy Research Institute (WPRI) report, "The Status of High School Education in Wisconsin: A Tale of Two Wisconsins." The report calls for sweeping reforms in the state's effort to reduce widening achievement differences between top- and low-performing school districts. The report's author, former *Wisconsin State Journal* reporter Phil McDade, also claims disparities in test scores between rich and poor districts are not attributable to school funding and should not be used as a reason to increase funding to low-performing districts.

Think Twice monitors scholarly research studies and reports on public education issues and policies published by national as well as regional think tanks in Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin. Think Twice contracts with respected, independent researchers at major universities across the country to examine whether the think tank studies are academically sound — whether the methodologies, primary research, secondary research, conclusions and recommendations meet the basic requirements of academic scholarship. Think Twice was founded to ensure that decisions made about public school reform are based on empirically sound research.

"Unfortunately, the WPRI report is bad science disguised and advanced as sound research," said Teri Battaglieri, director of the Great Lakes Center, an independent nonprofit coalition dedicated to supporting and disseminating sound academic research on education issues.

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“Decisions that can affect the future of every Wisconsin student should be based on information supported by facts and science,” Battaglieri said. “This report is so fatally flawed that it deserves two ‘Fs.’”

The Think Twice analysis of the WPRI report was conducted by William J. Mathis, adjunct associate professor of school finance at the University of Vermont and a former National Superintendent of the Year finalist. Mathis concluded that McDade’s findings are riddled with ideological assumptions not substantiated by extensive previous research and socio-economic data and analyses. Problems with the WPRI report include:

- WPRI’s claim that money does “not . . . make much of a difference” cannot be supported when the immense weight of academic literature is considered. As a matter of science, the issue is essentially settled — money does matter.
- The WPRI report’s finding that money does not impact academic performance reflects an inadequate methodology, limited by the author’s use of simple comparisons based upon a small portion (20%) of the state’s school districts. Moreover, the author did not consider the severely constricted financial range in the state, special needs children, regional cost of living, poverty impacted children, special education needs and the like.
- A growing achievement gap may be true, but the evidence in the WPRI report is insufficient to support or deny such a conclusion, and in no way can determine the cause. Whether looking at tests over time or different grades at the same time, test-score distributions are best understood as influenced by test differences, differences in mastery level and the increasing breadth of curriculum.
- Students who take college prep courses do better on college prep tests. This conclusion would surprise few. However, the data in the WPRI report cannot support a recommendation focused merely on requiring that all students take more rigorous coursework, without also devoting resources toward supports for teachers and students. Students come with a wide array of talents, interests, and motivations. Increased frustration, drop-outs, and disaffection with limited offsetting social or economic gains may result.

“To say that achievement scores are best predicted by wealth factors is one of the clearest and most consistent findings in social science research,” Mathis said. “A strong relationship does exist between poverty and test scores. However, the WPRI report fails to make a strong case for any of the other (policy recommendations) it introduces.”

Mathis, the Vermont Superintendent of the Year in 2002, has published or presented more than 150 national research papers, policy briefs, newspaper columns, and monographs on finance, assessment, school vouchers, cost-effectiveness, education reform, history, special education, and Constitutional issues. He also is on the Board of Directors of the American Education Finance Association and is a Senior Fellow of the Vermont Society for the Study of Education.

Think Twice is a joint project of the Education Policy Studies Lab at Arizona State University and the Education and Public Interest Center at the University of Colorado. It is funded by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice. The complete analysis of the WPRI report can be found at www.greatlakescenter.org.

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