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**NOTE TO EDITORS/REPORTERS:** This news release and related documents report information about students in the U.S. high school graduating class of 2009 who took the ACT college admission and placement exam. States, districts and schools receive similar information about their students. ACT releases only national and state data; **ACT does not release local district or school data.** You must contact district and school offices for local information.

## **College Readiness Increases Slightly Among ACT-Tested U.S. High School Grads, But Continued Effort to Improve Needed by States, Districts**

IOWA CITY, IOWA, August 19—The percentage of U.S. high school graduates meeting all four of ACT’s College Readiness Benchmarks increased slightly in 2009 as the pool of students taking the ACT<sup>®</sup> continued to expand, according to the not-for-profit ACT’s annual grad class report on college readiness, which was released today. Nevertheless, the findings suggest continued effort to improve college readiness is needed on the part of states and school districts.

The percentage of graduates ready to earn at least a “C” or higher in first-year college courses in all four subject areas tested on the ACT—English, math, reading and science—increased from 22 percent in 2008 to 23 percent in 2009. This percentage meeting all four benchmarks remains higher than in 2005 and 2006 and is the same as in 2007, when the pool of test-takers was likely less diverse in terms of academic preparation. A record nearly 1.5 million 2009 graduates took the ACT college admission and placement exam, up from 1.42 million in 2008.

Based on the actual performance of successful students in college, the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks specify the minimum scores needed on each ACT subject-area test to indicate a student is ready to succeed (50 percent chance of earning a “B” or higher or about a 75 percent chance of earning a “C” or higher) in a typical first-year, credit-bearing college course in that subject area. Years of empirical ACT data indicate that students who meet or surpass the College Readiness Benchmarks are more likely than those who don’t to go to college, stay in school and graduate with a college degree.

While the slight increase in students meeting all four benchmarks is encouraging, ACT’s report makes clear there is still substantial room for improvement in college readiness. The large majority of U.S. high school graduates continue to lack at least some of the academic skills they will need to earn at least a “C” or higher in first-year, for-credit college coursework. These findings underscore the need for school districts and states to focus their attention on the essential knowledge and skills needed for college and career readiness by all students.

“While there are certainly encouraging signs, the data overwhelmingly point to the need for continued improvement in our education system,” said Cynthia B. Schmeiser, president and chief operating officer of ACT’s education division. “Collectively, we all have an obligation and a responsibility to do everything within our power to make sure our nation’s students are better prepared for college and work upon graduation. Our students, schools, districts, states and nation cannot afford otherwise.”

“President Obama and I are committed to building excellent schools from cradle to career,” said U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. “For more and more Americans, completing college is a prerequisite for success in their careers. We need to increase the number of high school graduates who are prepared to succeed in college. The

recent increase in college preparedness on the ACT is good news. But our students need to do dramatically better to guarantee their future economic success.”

Lack of college readiness is again most evident in the areas of science and math. The findings show that only 28 percent of ACT-tested 2009 graduates (unchanged from 2008, up 2 percentage points from 2005) are ready for college-level biology, and just 42 percent (down 1 percentage point from 2008, up 1 percentage point from 2005) are ready for college-level algebra. In comparison, 67 percent (down 1 percentage point from 2008 and 2005) are ready for college-level English composition, while 53 percent (unchanged from 2008, up 1 percentage point from 2005) are ready for college-level social science.

These findings are critical in view of the growing importance of STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) careers in the expanding and increasingly competitive global economy. It has been widely argued that greater numbers of students need to gain advanced math and science knowledge to keep the U.S. labor force competitive. Reading skills are also critical, as ACT research has shown that being college ready in reading is a necessary precondition to students being ready for college-level math and science.

### **Average ACT Scores**

The national average ACT composite score for 2009 graduates was 21.1, unchanged from 2008 and 0.2 point higher than in 2005. The ACT is scored on a scale of 1 to 36, with 36 being the highest possible score.

The average scores on the four subject-area tests were as follows: English—20.6 (unchanged from 2008); mathematics—21.0 (unchanged); reading—21.4 (unchanged); science—20.9 (up 0.1 point). The average scores in English, math and reading are all higher than in 2005, while the average score in science is the same as it was in 2005.

### **ACT Scores Linked to Standards**

ACT's College Readiness Benchmark scores are directly linked to ACT's College Readiness Standards, which define the knowledge and skills students need to succeed in college-entry courses based on empirical evidence. College and career readiness standards are vital to ensuring that U.S. students are taught the rigorous skills they need to compete with their peers in other states and, particularly, in high-performing countries around the world. ACT research shows that students who have attained the essential college and career readiness skills are more likely to succeed in postsecondary education than those who have not. ACT's College Readiness Standards are directly measured by the test, making the ACT unique among college readiness exams.

ACT's results reveal that still too many high school graduates cannot adequately perform some of the essential college-ready skills in English, writing, reading, mathematics, and/or science.

In writing, for example, approximately 40 percent of 2009 ACT-tested graduates were not able to use the correct adverb or adjective form in a sentence, use the correct preposition in a phrase, or make sure that the subject and verb agree in a sentence. In reading, 30 percent of the graduates were unable to evaluate the contribution that significant details make to the text as a whole. In math, nearly 40 percent of the 2009 graduates could not solve multistep problems involving fractions and percentages. And in science, 40 percent could not predict the results of an additional trial of a scientific experiment. ACT's research shows these types of skills are needed for students to be ready for college and work.

These essential skills in writing, reading and math are illustrative of the standards that are likely to be included in the Common Core State Standards Initiative currently underway under the leadership of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)

and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center). ACT is a partner in this effort along with Achieve and the College Board.

“The results reported by ACT today demonstrate the key reason CCSSO and NGA began our work on the Common Core Standards Initiative—better preparing today’s students for the realities of college and career is the goal,” said Gene Wilhoit, executive director of CCSSO. “We applaud ACT for showing where we need to elevate state standards.”

Forty-nine states and U.S. territories have signed the memorandum of agreement and thereby are committed to a state-led process to develop a common core of standards in English language arts and mathematics for grades K-12.

### **Recommendations for Improvement**

As schools, states and national groups consider initiatives for improving student readiness, ACT offers the following recommendations on steps that states and school districts can take to better prepare students for college and career, based on hard evidence from the millions of students who have taken the ACT test in the past few decades:

- Adopt fewer—but essential—college and career readiness standards as their new high school graduation standards.
- Adopt a rigorous core curriculum for all high school graduates, whether they are bound for college or work.
- Define “how good is good enough” for college and career readiness.
- Strengthen the rigor of their courses.
- Begin monitoring academic achievement early to make sure younger students are on target to be ready for college and career.
- Establish longitudinal P-16 (preschool through college) data systems.

“ACT data continue to demonstrate the importance of giving educators the necessary tools to predict, prepare for, and achieve success for their students,” said Schmeiser. “ACT is committed to working with our educational state partners to impact this success and advance futures, one student at a time.”

### **Growing Number of Test-Takers**

Over the past several years, the population of ACT test-takers has grown substantially, reflecting greater diversity and increased awareness of the importance of post-high school preparation. The total number of ACT-tested graduates has grown by 25 percent since 2005, increasing by 4 percent this year compared to last year even as the total number of U.S. graduates declined slightly (from 3.34 million in 2008 to 3.32 million in 2009, based on Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education projections).

Contributing to the increase in participation has been the movement among states and districts to eliminate barriers to college access and to increase student preparation and college attendance. This year’s pool of ACT test-takers includes virtually all high school graduates in five states—Colorado, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, and Wyoming—which administer the ACT to all 11<sup>th</sup> graders as part of statewide assessment programs. This is the first year that Kentucky and Wyoming have been included in this group, adding thousands of students to the testing base who would likely not have been included in the past.

States that have adopted the ACT as a required assessment for 11<sup>th</sup> graders have seen their average ACT scores and college readiness levels drop initially as a result of the expanded pool of test-takers. This year, for example, Kentucky’s average ACT composite score was 1.5 points lower than last year’s average, while Wyoming’s average score dropped 1.1 points compared to last year.

Both Colorado and Illinois also saw their average scores decline in 2002 after they began administering the ACT to all students. Since that time, however, ACT score averages in both states have improved at twice the rate seen nationally.

In addition to the statewide assessment programs, nearly all 2009 graduates—approximately nine out of ten or more—took the ACT in Louisiana, Mississippi and Tennessee.

Another factor contributing to the rise in participation is ACT's commitment to increasing access among low-income students through fee waivers. This past year, more than 400,000 fee waivers for the ACT exam were issued, an increase of more than 100,000 from the year before. This resulted in substantially increased opportunities for students from low-income households to take the ACT and use their scores to apply to colleges.

### **About the ACT**

The ACT is a curriculum-based achievement exam designed to measure the academic skills that are taught in schools and deemed important for success in first-year college courses. ACT scores are accepted by all four-year colleges and universities across the country. ACT scores are also used to make appropriate course placement decisions by the majority of four-year schools in the U.S. The ACT is administered in all 50 states and is taken by a majority of high school graduates in 27 states.

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