

ACT State & Federal Policy Issue Brief



ACT®

Impacts from the Rise of Statewide School-Day ACT Testing

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For decades, the ACT® test has been a critical pathway for students to demonstrate college readiness, offering a bridge to higher education and career success. Similarly, student performance on the ACT has provided critical insights to educators, policymakers, and the public about the college readiness of the nation's high school graduates.

Since 2001, when Illinois introduced a statewide school-day ACT testing program as an innovative way to “bring credibility to the state’s student assessment program,” states, districts, and schools have been able to develop insights into the college readiness of their students and use these insights to improve their students’ education.¹ Over the last twenty-five years, more and more states have seen the value of offering

the ACT to all students—the ACT is now part of the statewide assessment program in twenty-three states. Analyzing student performance on the curriculum-based ACT now provides insights into the academic preparation of *all* students, not just those planning to attend college.

This brief explores how the growth of school-day testing has changed the overall population of annual ACT testers to be more representative of all students; it also highlights key insights from school-day testing programs nationwide.

Statewide School-Day ACT Programs Create a More Representative Testing Population

Since 2001, twenty-three states have enacted a statewide school-day ACT testing program for all juniors in the state. In many of these states, significant numbers of students were taking the ACT before the implementation of the

program, but as shown in Table 1, the participation rate in these states rose an average of 28 percentage points in the first year of universal junior testing. Over time, the proportion of students who take the ACT as part of the school-day testing program has grown. In the ACT 2024 graduating class, 78 percent of students participated in at least one school-day ACT administration.

When states, districts, or schools implement school-day testing, more students from low-income households and more students from traditionally underserved populations are able to participate, resulting in a more inclusive picture of students’ college readiness.

Statewide school-day ACT programs ensure that the test-taking population mirrors the demographics of the student body. ACT research has shown that when states, districts, or schools implement school-day testing, more students from low-income households and more

students from traditionally underserved populations are able to participate, resulting in a more inclusive picture of students' college readiness (Figure 1),² which not only provides these students with opportunities they may not otherwise have had but also provides educators and policymakers with better data that they can use to target interventions and resources.

When states, districts, or schools implement a school-day ACT program, they can access a much clearer picture of the college readiness of all their students—not just those who believe they are “college material” and choose to take the ACT. Figure 1 demonstrates that the students who choose to take the ACT on weekend test dates may not represent all high school students. In contrast, a statewide school-day ACT program represents an increase in opportunity and demonstrated preparedness for all groups of students.

Unsurprisingly, when school-day testing is implemented, allowing a broader and more academically diverse group

Table 1. Growth in ACT participation in the first year of the statewide school-day ACT program for juniors by state

State	First year of statewide school-day ACT program	ACT participation in the year before statewide school-day ACT	Growth in first year of statewide school-day ACT (percentage points)
Illinois	2001	*	*
Colorado	2001	*	*
Michigan	2008	70%	30
Kentucky	2009	72%	28
Wyoming	2009	80%	20
Louisiana	2010	89%	9
North Dakota	2011	81%	17
Utah	2012	73%	24
North Carolina	2013	20%	80
Hawai'i	2014	40%	50
Montana	2014	72%	28
Alabama	2015	80%	20
Minnesota	2016	78%	22
Mississippi	2016	100%	0
Missouri	2016	77%	23
Nevada	2016	40%	60
South Carolina	2016	62%	38
Wisconsin	2016	73%	27
Oklahoma	2017	82%	18
Nebraska	2018	84%	16
Ohio	2018	75%	25
Kansas	2020	72%	10
Arizona	2023	64%	34
Average	—	71%	28

* Illinois and Colorado began their statewide ACT programs in 2001. Participation data for 2000 is not currently available.

of students to participate instead of only self-selected students with college plans, average ACT scores tend to decrease. However, the more important fact is that

school-day testing provides significantly more students with the opportunity to demonstrate college readiness. Schools see an average increase of 29 percent in the number of

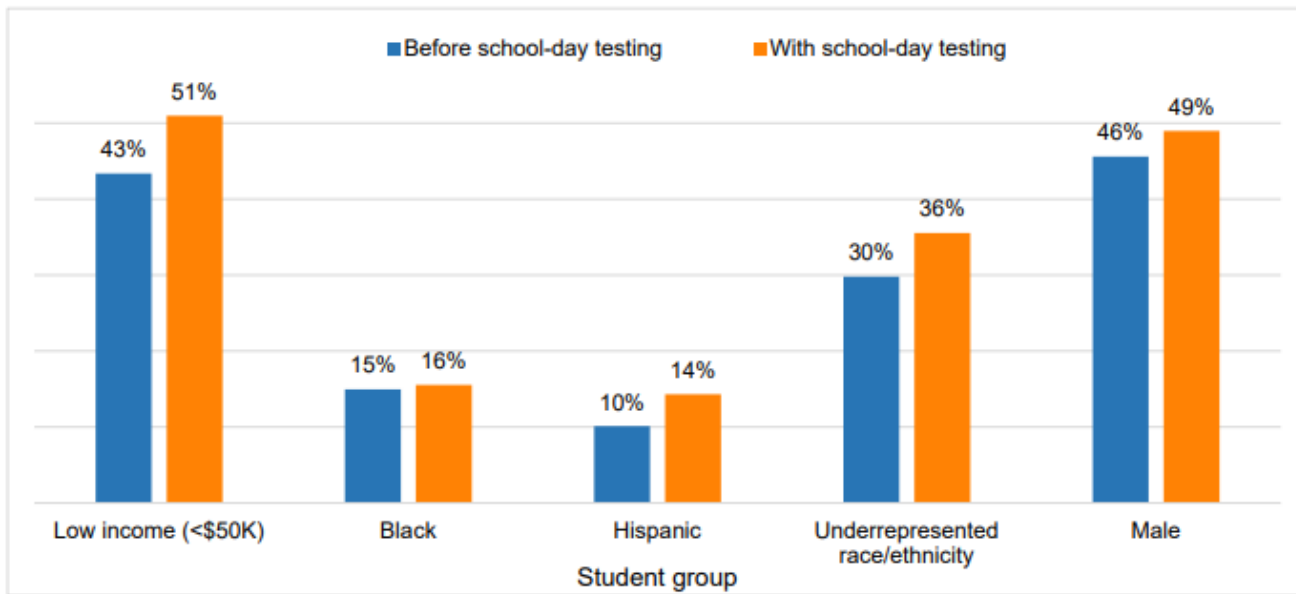


Figure 1. Demographics of ACT-tested graduating class

Source: [School-Day Administration of the ACT® Test: Removing Barriers and Opening Doors for All Students](#)

ACT College Readiness Benchmarks that are met when school-day testing is implemented, demonstrating that many students who would not otherwise take the ACT are able to demonstrate college readiness on the assessment when given

significant for students who come from low-income households (44 percent) or underrepresented racial/ethnic groups (47 percent), emphasizing the importance of expanding the opportunity to take the ACT.³

- Students have increased access and opportunities because barriers like cost and transportation to the testing site are removed.
- Educators can use data to make informed curriculum decisions, implement intervention strategies, and advise students.
- Students save time and money by earning test scores that allow them to bypass remedial college coursework.
- Students gain awareness of opportunities through ACT's career and college readiness inventories and the ACT Recruit Me service.

Significantly more students demonstrate college readiness when school-day testing is implemented, with the typical school seeing an increase of 29 percent in the number of College Readiness Benchmarks met.

the opportunity. Moreover, the gains are even more

Why States Implement Statewide School-Day ACT Programs

Foremost among the reasons that states implement statewide school-day ACT programs is because of the opportunities and benefits provided to all students. These include the following:

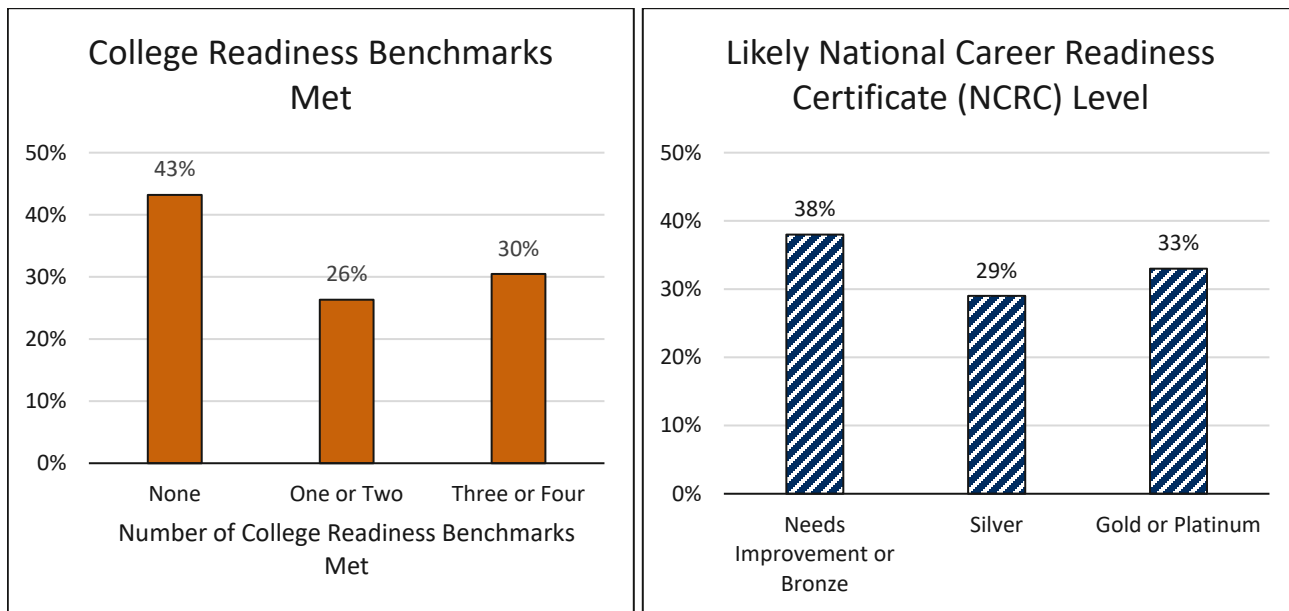


Figure 2. The left-hand panel shows the percentage of students in the ACT graduating class of 2024 meeting zero, one or two, and three or four ACT College Readiness Benchmarks. The right-hand panel shows the likely ACT WorkKeys NCRC level based on ACT Composite scores for the 2024 ACT graduating class.

Moreover, because of these advantages, students are incentivized to give their best effort on the assessment, and educators have reported higher levels of engagement with the assessment compared to custom state assessments.

For similar reasons, and particularly because of the heightened levels of engagement, educators can then use ACT scores to gain actionable insights that allow them to guide intervention at the student and school levels. Policymakers also benefit from robust data that allow for national comparisons.

high school. As the only nationally recognized college readiness exam that has fully met federal assessment requirements, the ACT helps states meet their testing obligations with a research-backed college readiness assessment.

A total of 43 percent of students in the ACT graduating class of 2024 were not ready for college in any subject, and 38 percent did not show career readiness at a level likely to earn a Silver or higher ACT WorkKeys National Career Readiness Certificate.

Finally, nine states have chosen to use the ACT to meet federal assessment requirements in English and math (and five in science) under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), reducing the number of tests taken by most students by eliminating the custom state tests often given in

Insights from a More Representative ACT Graduating Class

The expansion of school-day ACT testing has allowed ACT to glean several key insights into the national graduating class, insights that now include students who would have been excluded from this conversation twenty-five years ago. The

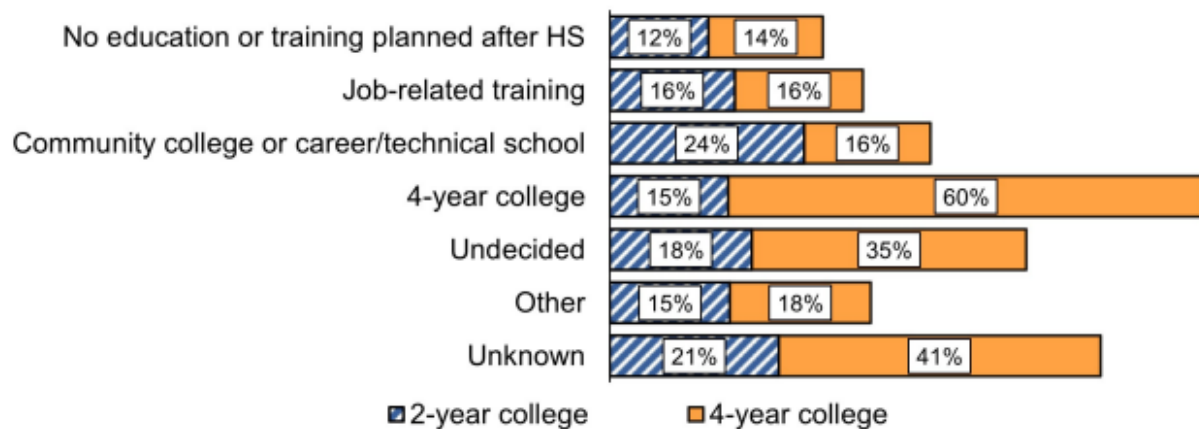


Figure 3. College enrollment rates among PreACT-tested students, by institution type and educational plans

Source: [PreACT®-Tested Students in the 2023 ACT®-Tested Graduating Class: A Summary of Performance and Growth](#)

second part of this brief highlights three of these insights.

Insight 1: There is a continued need to bolster academic and workforce readiness for all students.

In the ACT graduating class of 2024, 43 percent of students did not meet any of ACT’s four College Readiness Benchmarks (Figure 2). ACT’s Benchmarks represent the minimum ACT scores required for students to have a high probability of success in credit-bearing first-year college courses. Students who meet a Benchmark on the ACT have approximately a 50 percent chance of earning a B or better and approximately a 75 percent chance of earning a C or

better in corresponding college courses.⁴

Moreover, based on their ACT scores, more than one-third of students were unlikely to earn a Silver ACT® WorkKeys® National Career Readiness Certificate® (NCRC®) on the ACT® WorkKeys® Assessments. The NCRC is a commonly used standard for workforce readiness that correlates to having the foundational skills that are essential for roughly two-thirds of jobs.⁵ Because these Benchmarks are based on a clear, research-backed standard that is straightforwardly meaningful to students and families—success in college—they help students and educators understand student achievement in a national

context in a way that a locally created state assessment may not.

Among students who reported no education or training plans after high school, 26 percent still enrolled in college.

This suggests the continuing importance of bolstering academic and workforce readiness for all secondary students. These results also show the need for higher education institutions to prepare for students arriving without the preparation that typically correlates with academic success.

In addition to providing a national- or state-level view, the annual ACT-tested graduating class data can also help schools raise student achievement

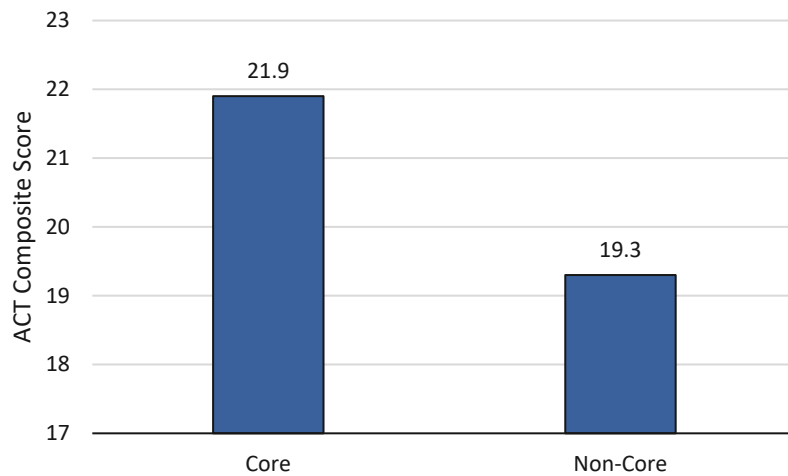


Figure 4. Average Composite score by curriculum for the ACT graduating class of 2024

locally. Using ACT data, many schools and districts, like those in Cody, Wyoming, have rallied school culture around raising student achievement.⁶

Insight 2: Many students who report no planned postsecondary education change their plans.

Another important result comes from self-reported plans for postsecondary education among students who took the PreACT®. Because all PreACT testing is conducted during the school day, this student population is typically representative of the students in the school.

Among students who reported no education or training plans after high school, 26 percent still enrolled in college, and

significant numbers of students who reported interest in programs typically associated with two-year colleges enrolled in a four-year college (Figure 3).⁷ By providing all students with the opportunity to take the ACT during the school day, states and districts are creating the conditions that allow students the flexibility to change their plans for postsecondary education.

This insight underscores another benefit of school-day testing: An ACT or PreACT score provides students with clear information that they can use to evaluate their own college readiness and perhaps reevaluate their plans. Indeed, students who reported no college plans but later enrolled in college scored higher than

similar students who did not end up enrolling. These data are also invaluable to counselors and other educators who advise students on their postsecondary decisions.

By highlighting the opportunities that arise from taking the ACT, states

Students who have completed the core curriculum have a Composite score that is 2.6 points higher than the score of those who have not.

can empower students to develop their college and career readiness. For example, Arkansas’s No Limits campaign helped encourage students to use the ACT to maximize their postsecondary opportunities.⁸

Insight 3: Students who complete the core curriculum score much higher than students who don’t.

For more than forty years, ACT has used students’ self-reported course-taking data to monitor the performance of students who have completed a core curriculum of four years of English and three years each of math, science, and social studies, and such self-reported

data are key to ACT's research efforts. Students who have completed this curriculum have consistently scored significantly higher on the ACT compared to students who have not, with students who have completed the core curriculum having a Composite score that is 2.6 points higher than the score of those who have not (Figure 4). This relationship has existed as long as ACT has kept track of this variable, and even as the population has changed, the direction of the relationship has not.

In some cases, such as in Helena Public School District, implementing ACT-recommended course patterns has been associated with growth in meeting the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks.⁹

Conclusion

The rise of statewide school-day ACT programs has profoundly reshaped how we understand and address the postsecondary readiness of high school graduates on a national scale. This shift to school-day testing has transformed how states, districts, and schools drive interventions, allocate resources, and shape

policies that support all learners. By implementing ACT school-day testing programs, states and districts will open doors for students who might otherwise be excluded from these opportunities and will provide educators and policymakers with a more accurate and holistic understanding of student preparedness.

Statewide testing programs are more than an initiative to expand access—they represent a critical step toward a future where every student, regardless of background, has the chance to demonstrate their potential and succeed. As we continue to learn from these programs, the insights they generate will serve as a foundation for building resilient, more future-ready education systems across the country.

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