

CASE STUDY

Setting Students' Sights on College: Chicago Public Schools

Challenge

Part of the third-largest school district in the nation, 77 percent of Chicago's nearly 427,000 public school students are poor, as defined by eligibility for participation in free or reduced-cost lunch programs. Many are members of minorities; many have limited proficiency in English. These young people, like students everywhere, are striving for a good education and a prosperous future. To make a successful transition to college—even to graduate from high school—many young people in the Chicago school system face hurdles unimaginable in the nearby suburbs. For example, some Chicago high schools have well over 2,000 students, but only three or four counselors in the entire school to meet their needs.

The Chicago Public School system (CPS) wants to increase the college readiness of the city's students. Its goal is to increase the numbers of students who take a rigorous curriculum and set their sights on getting into the most challenging college for which they are qualified. The CPS also wants to improve high school graduation rates and college attendance rates, and to provide a basis for curricular interventions to improve student performance.

Solution

The CPS instituted citywide administrations of EXPLORE[®] and PLAN[®] to help all Chicago Public School students begin thinking and planning for higher education and to prepare them for statewide administration of the PSAE (Prairie State Achievement Examinations, which include the ACT[®] test) beginning in spring 2001. The CPS tests both grade 8 and grade 9 students using EXPLORE and grade 10 and grade 11 students using PLAN. This allows the CPS to monitor the effectiveness of its curriculum for each 12-month period.

Why EPAS?

EXPLORE, PLAN, and the ACT—the three programs in ACT's Educational Planning and Assessment System (EPAS[™])—provide an assessment system that measures student readiness along a continuum of college readiness benchmarks. EPAS allows teachers, counselors, and students themselves to track academic progress from eighth through twelfth grades on skills directly related and linked to college preparation. According to Susan Szurek, an English teacher at the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences, "The classroom teachers use the PLAN item analysis report from ACT to determine instructional focus. Administratively, the school uses test information from the EXPLORE and PLAN to determine where tutoring dollars will be spent. For ACT preparation, scores are reviewed to organize homogeneous groups that will target specific ACT College Readiness Standards. In general, the EPAS system is a most useful tool."

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*Susan Szurek
English Teacher
Chicago High School for
Agricultural Sciences*

In conjunction with assessing academic progress, EPAS helps students plan for their future by providing information on careers that match their interests and skills. Encouraging students to think about possible careers early on allows them to plan more effectively for the academic courses they will need to achieve their career goals. In the words of Cynthia Barron, who supervises high school principals and is charged with the responsibility of instructional improvement in area high schools for CPS, “My principals clearly use the EPAS system to determine growth patterns of students as they move from the EXPLORE to the PLAN and to the ACT examination as well as identifying curriculum gaps. We challenge ourselves to respond to this powerful data.”

The Illinois State Board of Education chose to include the ACT in the PSAE because it is a long-established, thoroughly tested examination that measures educational achievement in English, mathematics, reading, and science, academic areas covered by the PSAE. The knowledge and skills measured by the ACT are closely aligned with Illinois’ Learning Standards and with success in college. The higher a student’s score on the ACT, the more likely that student is to be college ready, to achieve higher grades in college, and to persist to a college degree.

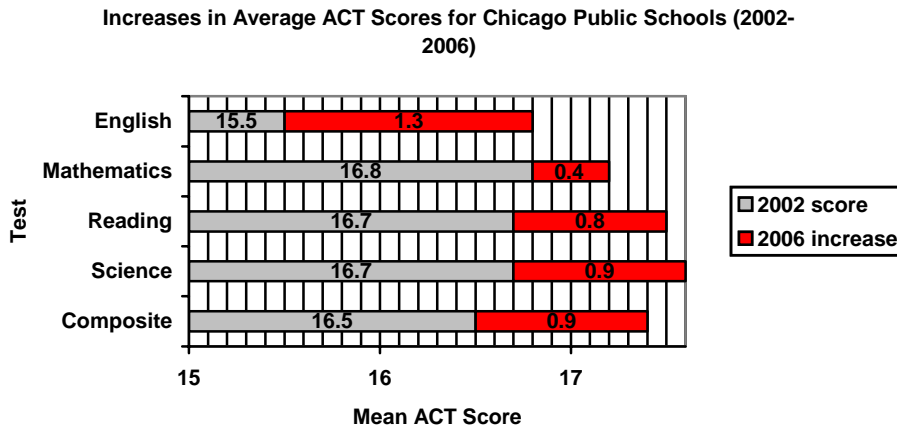
Results

Predictably, average citywide ACT scores followed the state trend and dipped for the 2002 graduation class (i.e., the first class that took the first administration of the PSAE in spring 2001) due to the increase in the number of test takers at all achievement levels. Students have been making steady progress ever since—even as the numbers of students tested has continued to rise.

Since 2002, the first year in which all Chicago public high school graduates had taken the ACT as juniors:

- **The number of Chicago students taking the ACT has continued to grow each year, representing opportunity for more students.**
 - Prior to 2002, just over 8,500 graduates took the ACT. Since then the number of graduates taking the ACT has increased steadily, from 15,257 in 2002 (nearly twice the 2001 number) to 17,790 in 2006, an increase of more than 16 percent.
- **Student performance is improving.**
 - The average ACT Composite score for the virtually 100 percent of Chicago Public School graduates who took the test in 2006 is higher than the average ACT Composite score for the self-selected group of college-bound Chicago Public School graduates (approximately 40 percent) who took the test in 1999.
 - Chicago students increased scores on the ACT in every subject in 2006 over 2002. Fifty-nine of the 69 city public high schools (86 percent) administering the ACT improved their students’ average ACT Composite scores.
 - Between 2002 and 2006, Chicago students have increased their ACT scores in all subject areas, with the most dramatic increases in English, Reading, and Science. ACT Composite scores increased from 16.5 to 17.4; English Test scores increased from 15.5 to 16.8; Mathematics Test scores increased

from 16.8 to 17.2; Reading Test scores increased from 16.7 to 17.5; and Science Test scores increased from 16.7 to 17.6, as shown below.



- Compared to all students in Illinois, between 2002 and 2006 Chicago students had greater average score gains on all four tests and the ACT Composite. Chicago score gains were 0.5 score points greater in English, Reading, Science, and the Composite and 0.3 score points greater in Mathematics. Chicago students’ gains in average Mathematics, Reading, Science, and Composite scores were at least double those of students statewide.

Score Gains for Chicago Public Schools Compared to Illinois (2002-2006)

	Chicago Public Schools	Illinois	Difference
English	1.3	0.8	+0.5
Math	0.4	0.1	+0.3
Reading	0.8	0.3	+0.5
Science	0.9	0.4	+0.5
Composite	0.9	0.4	+0.5

- In 2006, ACT Composite scores increased for all racial/ethnic groups. Between 2002 and 2006, average score increases for all racial/ethnic groups ranged between 0.6 and 1.8 score points.
- Between 2002 and 2006, Chicago students increased their college readiness by 9 percent in English, 3 percent in Reading, 2 percent in Mathematics, and 2 percent in Science. There was also a 1-percent increase in the number of students who met or exceeded all four ACT College Readiness Benchmarks. This means that an additional 305 Chicago students met all four College Readiness Benchmarks in 2006 compared to 2002.
- **Most students are planning to enter some form of postsecondary education.**
 - The number of students requesting assistance with educational or occupational plans increased by 900 between 2002 and 2006, showing increased awareness and valuing of post-high school planning.

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*Cynthia Barron
Area Instruction Officer
Chicago Public Schools
High School Area 25*

- In 2006, 61 percent of Chicago students indicated a desire to attend some form of postsecondary education: 32 percent said they aspire to graduate study or a professional-level degree, 19 percent said they aspire to a bachelor's degree, and 10 percent said they aspire to a vocational/technical or 2-year college degree.