

Standardized Testing in Alabama and Nationwide

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Standardized testing serves several purposes. Tests provide feedback on a student's performance. They can help teachers understand student achievement relative to class objectives. Tests can also help administrators identify excellent teachers and those who need more professional support. And, likewise, they can help administrators and policymakers identify which schools are high performing and which are not serving students effectively.

Alabama's previous generation of standardized tests provided a skewed picture on all of these fronts. In short, previous tests only considered Alabama's students performance as it related to their peers in the state, but the new tests will broaden this horizon. Alabama is implementing a new generation of standardized tests to provide more clarity, however the new assessments will still only provide a snapshot of student performance at one point in time. It will take much more work and research to implement any assessment that captures student growth modeling and provides more than just an annual snapshot.

This memo provides a brief overview of the standardized testing landscape in Alabama, especially as it relates to the College and Career Ready Standards in our state and the Common Core State Standards nationally.

Overview of Alabama's Testing Landscape

In April 2013 the Alabama State Board of Education (SBOE) adopted the ACT Aspire tests for end-of-year assessments to replace the Alabama Reading and Math Test for grades 3-8.¹ Aspire is developed by the non-profit organization ACT, which also administers the college-readiness test of the same name.

The Aspire tests are aligned with Alabama's College and Career Ready Standards (CCRS) for math and English language arts that were adopted by the SBOE in 2010. The CCRS math standards were implemented in schools during the 2012-13 school year, and the CCRS English language arts standards were implemented this year. The 2013-14 school year was the first year of the Aspire tests.

¹ State Superintendent Thomas R. Bice to City and County Superintendents, April 30, 2013, Alabama State Department of Education, Interest in the Administration of ACT Aspire.

² Bice to Superintendents, July 11, 2012, ALSDE, Phasing Out the Alabama High School Graduation Exam.

Using Aspire in the lower grades complements Alabama’s assessment improvements in the upper grades. The upper-grade assessments include three different batteries of assessments, each addressing different skills for high school students:

- ACT College and Career Readiness System (which includes the ACT itself) – *fully implemented by 2013-14*
- ACT WorkKeys – *to be fully implemented in 2014-15*
- ACT QualityCore subject-specific End-of-Course Tests – *to be fully implemented when funding allows*

In 2009, the SBOE voted to phase out the Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE) and replace it with ACT’s subject-specific QualityCore End-of-Course Assessments for grades 9-12.² These end-of-course tests (EOCs) can help better determine a student’s readiness for college or a career in specific subjects. **The graduating class of 2013 was the last class required to pass the AHSGE.³**

In the 2012-13 school year, Alabama high schools began administering EOCs in a limited number of subjects and most did not include the scores as a percentage of students’ grades. This was meant to inform future decisions regarding the assessments’ use.⁴ **Beginning with the 2013-14 school year, high schools will administer EOCs in Algebra I and English 10.⁵** These two EOCs will also be given again during the 2014-15 school year.⁶ Local systems will decide whether or not these tests count as part of a student’s final grade.

Ultimately, EOCs will expand to include the following, when funding permits:

- English 9
- English 10
- English 11
- English 12
- Algebra I
- Geometry
- Algebra II
- Pre-Calculus
- Biology
- Chemistry
- Physics
- U.S. History⁷

Simultaneously, **2013-14 marked the first school year that all juniors in Alabama (the Class of 2015) took the ACT college readiness test, the capstone in the ACT College and Career Readiness System.** In 2012-13, all members of the Class of 2015 took ACT’s “Plan” test as sophomores, and as 8th graders they took ACT’s “Explore” test. Beginning in 2014, the Explore and Plan will be replaced with the Aspire for 8th and 10th grades in order

² Bice to Superintendents, July 11, 2012, ALSDE, Phasing Out the Alabama High School Graduation Exam.

³ Alabama State Board of Education, November 14, 2013, “Resolution to Modify Graduation Requirements for Students,” http://www.alsde.edu/sites/boe/_bdc/ALSDEBOE/BOE%20-%20Resolutions_3.aspx?ID=2041, last accessed May 16, 2014.

⁴ Bice to Superintendents, Oct. 19, 2012, ALSDE, Clarifications.

⁵ Bice to Superintendents, July 12, 2013, ALSDE, Revisions to the Testing Program and Testing Dates.

⁶ Bice to Superintendents, January 21, 2014, ALSDE, Revisions to 2014-15 Testing Dates.

⁷ Bice to Superintendents, January 22, 2013, ALSDE, Revisions to the 2012-13, 2013-14, and 2014-15 Testing Dates.

to better align with the well known ACT exam.⁸ This test battery will track a student's progress toward meeting the ACT's College Readiness Benchmarks in English, Math, Reading, and Science. These benchmarks are defined as scores out of 36 and increase on each test on a trajectory toward college readiness (see below).⁹

ACT sets its College Readiness Benchmarks as the "minimum score needed on an ACT subject-area test to indicate a 50% chance of obtaining a B or higher or about a 75% chance of obtaining a C or higher in the corresponding credit-bearing college courses."¹⁰

ACT Subject-Area Test	ACT <i>Explore</i> Benchmark (Grade 8)	ACT <i>Plan</i> Benchmark (Grade 10)	The ACT Benchmark
English	13	15	18
Mathematics	17	19	22
Reading	16	18	22
Science	18	20	23

These scores serve a dual purpose. The ACT is used as a widely accepted college entrance exam, but starting **in 2015—when performance data are available for all Alabama graduating students—these data will serve as indicators of whether Alabama high school graduates are prepared for college.**

For example:

- **In 2013, only 20% of Alabama's graduating seniors who took the ACT met all four College Readiness Benchmarks. Nationally, this number was 26%.¹¹**
- In 2012, 18% of Alabama's graduating seniors who took the ACT met all four College Readiness Benchmarks. Nationally, 25% met all four benchmarks in 2012.¹²

Currently, these college-readiness percentages are inflated, because students who have taken the ACT in previous years were only those who planned to attend college. For example, in 2013 about 78% of graduating students in Alabama had taken the ACT. The good news is that this is an increase of 6.5% from five years ago.

This increase in students taking the ACT reflects a changing landscape, where employers are more often looking for workers with some sort of post-secondary education, and students are looking to obtain it. In 2013, 88% of ACT takers planned to attend college

⁸ "Overview," ACT, accessed May 23, 2014, <http://www.act.org/products/k-12-act-plan/>.

⁹ "ACT College Readiness Benchmarks," ACT, accessed Oct. 14, 2013, <http://www.act.org/solutions/college-career-readiness/college-readiness-benchmarks/>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *ACT Profile Report – State, Graduating Class 2013, Alabama*, ACT, 2013, <http://www.act.org/newsroom/data/2013/pdf/profile/Alabama.pdf>, last accessed Oct. 14, 2013.









¹² *Ibid.*

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and/or graduate school, and 94% planned to continue their education beyond high school.¹³ In Alabama, the Department of Industrial Relations estimated in 2008 that of the 40 jobs expected to see the highest increases in demand by 2018, 32 of them required some form of post-secondary education.¹⁴

By giving all juniors the opportunity to take the ACT, Alabama is joining a growing number of states.¹⁵ Many states are now paying for its students to take one or more other tests developed by ACT, as can be seen in the table below. (Alabama will likely be included on the “11th and 12th grade students” list next year.)

ACT Partnerships with States:¹⁶

 ACT ^{Aspire}	 ACT ^{Explore}	 ACT ^{Plan}	 The ACT	 ACT ^{QualityCore}	 ACT ^{WorkKeys}		
3rd- through 8th-grade students	8th- and 9th-grade students	10th-grade students	11th- and 12th-grade students	8th- through 12th-grade students	11th- and 12th-grade students	ACT National Career Readiness Certificate™	ACT WorkKeys®-based certificates
Alabama	Alabama	Alabama	Arkansas	Alabama	Alaska	Alaska	Alabama
	Arkansas	Arkansas	Colorado	Kentucky	Illinois	Connecticut	Arkansas
	Hawaii	Florida	Hawaii		Hawaii	Indiana	Colorado
	Illinois	Hawaii	Illinois		Michigan	Iowa	Florida
	Kentucky	Illinois	Kentucky		North Carolina	Kentucky	Georgia
	Louisiana	Kentucky	Louisiana		North Dakota	Louisiana	Indiana
	Michigan	Louisiana	Michigan		Wyoming	Michigan	Kansas
	Minnesota	Michigan	Montana			Minnesota	Mississippi
	North Carolina	Minnesota	North Carolina			Missouri	North Carolina
	Oklahoma	New Mexico	North Dakota			Montana	Oklahoma
	South Carolina	North Carolina	Tennessee			New Hampshire	South Carolina
	Tennessee	Oklahoma	Utah			New Mexico	Virginia
	Utah	Tennessee	Wyoming			North Dakota	West Virginia
	West Virginia	Utah				Ohio	Virginia
	Wyoming	West Virginia				Oregon	Wyoming
		Wyoming				Pennsylvania	
						South Dakota	
						Tennessee	
						Vermont	
						Wisconsin	

¹³ ACT Profile Report 2013.

¹⁴ Alabama Department of Industrial Relations, Alabama's Hot 40 Demand Occupations." 2009. http://www2.dir.alabama.gov/OES/OES_Posters/hotjobs.pdf last accessed Oct. 28, 2013.

¹⁵ Tamar Lewin, "Testing, Testing: More Students Are Taking Both the ACT and SAT," *The New York Times*, Aug. 2, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/04/education/edlife/more-students-are-taking-both-the-act-and-sat.html?pagewanted=all&_r=2&, last accessed Oct. 22, 2013.

¹⁶ ACT Profile Report 2013.

Beginning in 2014-15 seniors in Alabama will also be able to take ACT WorkKeys assessments.¹⁷ WorkKeys are job skills assessments for students interested in heading straight into a career “that help employers select, train, develop, and retain a high-performance workforce.”¹⁸ These assessments will further connect Alabama students to the real world, building on the College and Career Ready Standards used in grades K-12.

Students can take WorkKeys assessments in the following areas:

Foundational Skill Assessments

Applied Mathematics
Applied Technology
Business Writing
Listening for Understanding
Locating Information
Workplace Observation
Reading for Information
Teamwork

Soft Skill Assessments

Fit
Talent
Performance¹⁹

Looming “Drops” in Scores in Alabama

With these changes in assessments, Alabama is likely to experience two different “drops” in standardized test scores in 2014 and 2015. Both will be unpopular, but both are necessary to improve educational outcomes.

- The **2014 “drop”** in scores will occur when the percentage of students deemed “proficient” in grades 3-8 declines due to the new Aspire tests being aligned with the more rigorous College and Career Ready Standards.
- The **2015 “drop”** in scores will occur when *all* of Alabama’s graduating students have taken the ACT and Alabama’s percentage of students meeting the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks drops. Previously, the only students who took the ACT in Alabama were those who voluntarily took it in preparation for applying to college.

Alabama’s new standards raise the bar academically for students. As a result, students will have to perform at a higher level on the CCRS-aligned Aspire in order to be deemed “proficient” in reading and math. In the long run, students will rise to the challenge, but in the short run this will result in a rude awakening for students and their parents who are accustomed to being told they are “proficient” by the ARMT.

The Aspire judges students more like the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the Nation’s Report Card. The NAEP is given to a random sample of

¹⁷ Bice to Superintendents, July 11, 2012, ALSDE, Phasing Out the Alabama High School Graduation Exam.

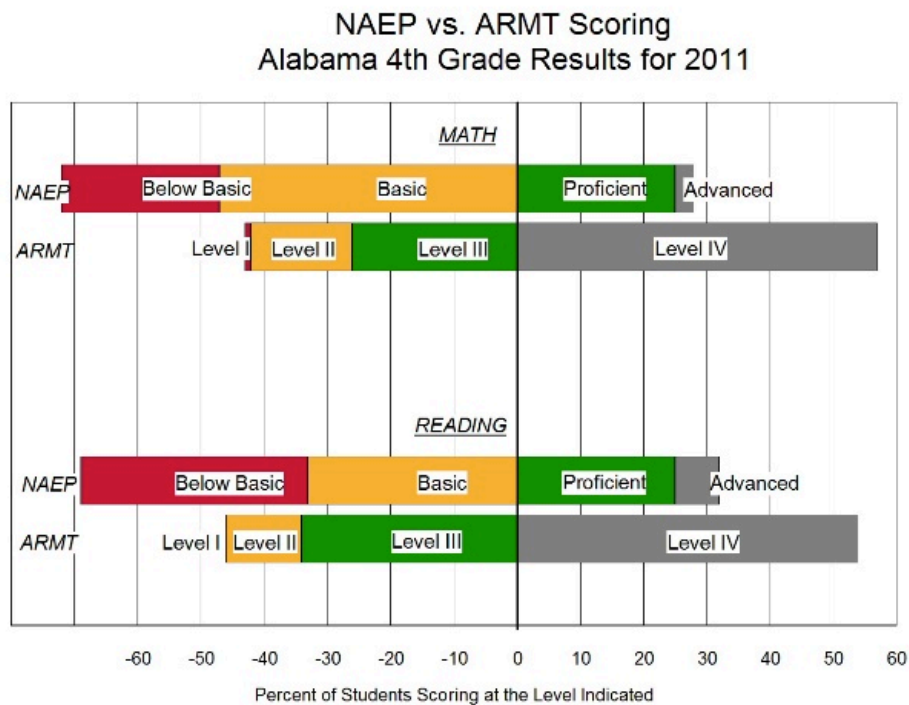
¹⁸ Overview, ACT WorkKeys, <http://www.act.org/products/workforce-act-workkeys/>, last accessed Oct. 22, 2013.

¹⁹ ACT WorkKeys FAQ, ACT, <http://www.act.org/workkeys/assess/faq.html>, last accessed Oct. 23, 2013.

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students nationwide every two years. NAEP questions are more in-depth than the ARMT questions and are often open-ended instead of multiple choice. Additionally, the NAEP uses higher cut scores to determine who is deemed proficient.

According to the 2011 NAEP, less than 30% of Alabama fourth graders were proficient or advanced in math, while the ARMT classified nearly 80% as the equivalent (Level III or IV) in the same year. In reading, just over 30% of Alabama fourth graders were deemed Proficient or Advanced on the NAEP, while the ARMT said roughly 90% met those marks:



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Alabama is not alone. Forty-four other states and the District of Columbia also use some form of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and they will likely see similar drops in test scores over the next several years. Kentucky was the first state to fully adopt the standards and CCSS-aligned assessments, and their test scores dropped in 2012.²¹ The same happened in New York in 2013.²² **While these drops in test scores look like a decline in performance, they are actually a shift in measurement to a more accurate picture of student proficiency.** Unfortunately, we've set the bar too low for most students in recent years, both in Alabama and nationally. As students adjust to the increased rigor of the work, states' proficiency rates in grades 3-8 will climb in future years.

²⁰ "Statewide ARMT Test Score Comparisons for Alabama Schools," Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama, <http://parca.samford.edu/education/SystemsTestScores/Systems.html>, accessed Oct. 13, 2013.

²¹ Andrew Ujifusa, "Scores Drop on Ky.'s Common Core-Aligned Tests," *Education Week*, Nov. 2, 2012, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/11/02/11standards.h32.html>, last accessed Oct. 14, 2013.

²² Andrew Ujifusa, State EdWatch, "Tests Aligned to Common Core in New York State Trigger Score Drops," Aug. 7, 2013, http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/state_edwatch/2013/08/one_interesting_aspect_of.html, last accessed Oct. 14, 2013.

It's difficult to determine how large a drop Alabama will experience with new CCRS-aligned tests in grades 3-8. According to the NAEP comparison above, Alabama could see its proficiency rates drop by as much as two-thirds. New York's proficiency rate dropped to 31% from 55% last year, in its first year of having CCSS-aligned tests. Kentucky saw a drop of about one third in its first year of new tests. It then saw mixed results with gains and decreases across subgroups of students in its second year, but all changes were minor compared to the dramatic first year changes.

Conversely, it's possible that the new standards have so invigorated teachers and engaged students that Alabama's drop in scores will be smaller than expected, thanks to enlivened classrooms. Through A+'s work with teachers and in schools, we hear anecdotal reports from teachers who feel like the new standards have helped them improve their craft, and students are learning at higher levels as a result. For example, Farrah Kilgo, a fourth grade teacher in Etowah County, wrote this on her blog last February during her first year working with the CCRS:

*We are less than 3/4 of the way through the school year now, but it is clear that the implementation of the CCRS in math has transformed the thinking and learning in my classroom... Conceptual knowledge and number sense are growing in my students, and they're becoming... really great thinkers. They're excited and eager, and the thinking strategies they're using are overlapping into other areas of the curriculum.*²³

The actual effect of the new standards and assessments on scores is yet to be seen. The best thing Alabama can do in the meantime is ensure teachers have access to the professional development and support they need in order to continue improving.

The cause of the second test score drop, in high school, will be different. **In 2015, all of Alabama's graduating high school students will have taken the ACT for the first time.** Starting in 2014 with juniors (the Class of 2015) Alabama will pay for all students to take the ACT. Previously, only students considering college would take the ACT. (In 2013, this was 78% of Alabama high school graduates.) **This larger pool of test-takers will likely result in a decline in the percentage of Alabama students deemed "college ready" by the ACT benchmarks** discussed above.

We can only estimate what percentage of students will meet all four of the ACT's College Readiness Benchmarks in 2015 since students self-selected to take the ACT in previous years. In 2013 in Alabama, 38,122 students graduating in public and private schools had taken the ACT, which is 78% of the overall graduating class.²⁴ Among those students who

²³ Farrah Kilgo, "In Support of Common Core Standards," *Think, Share, Teach*, <http://thinkshareteach.blogspot.com/2013/02/in-support-of-common-core-standards.html>, last accessed Oct. 23, 2013.

²⁴ ACT Profile Report 2013.

took the ACT, only 20% met all four ACT benchmarks, or approximately 7,624 students. In the worst-case scenario, if the other 22% of 2013 graduates had taken the ACT and none met all four college readiness benchmarks, only 15.5% of graduating students in 2013 would have been deemed college ready.²⁵ Presumably, since Alabama now has higher academic standards that are meant to prepare students for college or a career, we won't experience this worst-case scenario since future students will be better prepared when they reach the ACT.

Despite the tough medicine of these impending perceived drops, Alabama is on par with many states in setting its sights on college and career readiness for all students. These assessments help provide students and their families with honest feedback on where they stand as they consider their options for after high school. However, states are choosing different paths appropriate for their situations. This is discussed in more detail below.

National Assessment Landscape for Common Core State Standards

Alabama's adoption of the ACT Aspire for grades 3-8 in April marked a departure from other states' paths regarding the next generation of assessments. **There are two competing consortia of states developing assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS):**

- **PARCC** (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers): <http://www.parcconline.org/about-parcc>
- **Smarter Balanced** Assessment Consortium: <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/about/>

Alabama was a "participating" or "advisory" member of both consortia until February 2013 when the ALSDE left both consortia.²⁶

PARCC consists of 17 states that collectively contain roughly 15 million students. Each state's chief state school officer sits on the PARCC governing board, which meets quarterly.²⁷ The consortium was funded through a Race To The Top Grant from the U.S. Department of Education. PARCC is developing several types of tests for math and English language arts (ELA) that will be used in participating states in grades 3-11 in the 2014-15 school year:

²⁵ Calculated using ACT's data source: graduate estimates from "Data Explore," *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates*, Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, http://knocking.wiche.edu/explore?state_id=AL, last accessed Oct. 25, 2013.

²⁶ Catherine Gewertz, Education Week, "Alabama Withdraws From Both Testing Consortia," *Curriculum Matters* (Feb. 1, 2013), http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/curriculum/2013/02/alabama_withdraws_from_both_te.html (last viewed Oct. 2, 2013).

²⁷ "About PARCC," PARCC, <http://www.parcconline.org/about-parcc>, last accessed May 19, 2014.

- Diagnostic assessments
- Mid-year assessments
- Performance-based assessments
- End-of-year assessments

All students are expected to take the performance-based assessments and the end-of-year assessments. The diagnostic and mid-year assessments will be voluntary. The end-of-course tests are expected to take eight to 10 hours to complete, depending on the grade level.²⁸

All of PARCC's tests will be administered online and be compatible with different types of devices, and the ELA assessment also includes a speaking and listening component. PARCC's goal is to return results from performance-based and end-of-year assessments before the end of the school year so that teachers and students can benefit from the information. (Current tests generally do not allow teachers to see results until the summer or fall, when their students have already left.) The other PARCC assessments will provide feedback to teachers, students and parents during the school year.

PARCC assessments are estimated to cost \$29.50 per student, which is roughly the average cost that its member states spend now on assessments.²⁹

The **Smarter Balanced** consortium consists of 23 states and territories that collectively serve 19 million public K-12 students.³⁰ The state education chiefs (superintendents, chancellors, etc.) from member states or their representatives lead the consortium. "Governing" states serve as voting members and "Advisory" and "Affiliate" states participate as non-voting members.³¹ Like PARCC, Smarter Balanced is funded through a four-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education.³² Smarter Balanced is developing assessments for grades 3-8 and 11 that include:

- summative assessments
- interim assessments
- formative tools and resources
- an online reporting system regarding student progress and college and career readiness.

²⁸ PARCC, *PARCC Frequently Asked Questions Updated – September 2013*, http://www.parcconline.org/sites/parcc/files/PARCCFAQ_9-18-2013.pdf, last accessed Oct. 14, 2013.

²⁹ "Assessment of Cost Estimates," PARCC, <http://parcconline.org/assessment-cost-estimates>, last accessed Oct. 14, 2013.

³⁰ Member States, Smarter Balanced, <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/about/member-states/>, last accessed May 19, 2014.

³¹ Smarter Balanced, "Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium Governance Structure Document," July 1, 2010, amended Sept. 19, 2013, <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Smarter-Balanced-Governance.pdf>.

³² "Frequently Asked Questions," Smarter Balanced, <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/resources-events/faqs/>, last accessed Oct. 22, 2013.

All of the assessments will be given online, beginning in the 2014-15 school year. In the spring of 2014, the Smarter Balanced will administer a field test of its summative and interim assessments, allowing for feedback during the summer of 2014. The summative assessments will take four to nine hours to complete for both ELA and math, depending on grade level.³³

Unlike PARCC, the Smarter Balanced tests will use computer adaptive technology that uses students' responses to adjust difficulty throughout the assessment.³⁴ Many common admissions tests, like the GRE used for graduate school admissions and the GMAT used for business school admissions, use similar computer adaptive testing (CAT) technology.

Smarter Balanced's end-of-year test is estimated to cost \$22.50, while the "full suite" of tests will cost roughly \$27.30 per student. According to the Smarter Balanced website, two-thirds of its member states currently pay more than this for their standardized tests.

³³ Smarter Balanced, "Table 2: Estimates testing times for Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments," <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Preliminary-Summative-Blueprints-Supporting-Document.pdf>, accessed Oct. 22, 2013.

³⁴ Computer Adaptive Testing, Smarter Balanced, <http://www.smarterbalanced.org/smarter-balanced-assessments/computer-adaptive-testing/>, last accessed Oct. 22, 2013.