

Academic Standards in Alabama

February 2014

Introduction

The success of Alabama rests on its citizens' ability to compete in a global economy. Today's students must receive an education that prepares them for the demands of their future. However, both national and international assessments show that Alabama students are woefully behind their peers in other states and nations in academic performance. On the ACT, only 20% of Alabama students graduating in 2013 who took the ACT met all four College Readiness benchmarks (meaning they were ready for college-level coursework).¹ On international assessments, the latest data available show Alabama ranked 82nd in reading and 91st in math (out of 116 countries and U.S. states).²

Education policymakers and educators in Alabama are committed to improving the state's public education system to ensure that students gain the knowledge and skills they need to graduate from high school ready for real life. The state is on the path to implementing higher academic standards—the College and Career Ready Standards—which

lay a foundation to ensure that classroom instruction across Alabama provides students with real world skills and knowledge in reading, math and writing.

There has been a large amount of conflicting information distributed about Alabama's College and Career Ready Standards based on the Common Core State Standards. The following memo answers numerous questions and corrects misinformation that is being spread about Alabama's College and Career Ready Standards and the Common Core State Standards.³ We hope you will refer to this primer in your discussions around Alabama's educational future.

A+ Education Partnership is a nonpartisan, 501(c)3 organization that strives to ensure every child in Alabama has a great school to attend in order to receive an excellent education. Founded in 1991, A+ is home to two divisions working in schools and with teachers and students across the state: the [Alabama Best Practices Center](#) and [A+ College Ready](#).

¹ 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.

² Peterson, P.E., Woessmann, L., Hanushek, E. and Lastra-Anadon, C.X., August 2011, *Globally Challenged: Are U.S. Students Ready to Compete? The latest on each state's international standing in math and reading*. Harvard University Program on Education Policy and Governance: Report No.: 11-03. http://www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/PDF/Papers/PEPG11-03_GloballyChallenged.pdf, last accessed Feb. 26, 2013.

³ A+ Education Partnership is grateful to the Tennessee State Collaborative on Reforming Education for allowing portions of its November 2013 brief *Academic Standards in Tennessee* on the national education policy landscape to be used for this memo.

Timeline: Alabama's Path to College and Career Ready Standards

The Code of Alabama 1975, Section 16-35-3 states, "The Courses of Study Committee shall... prepare the contents of the courses of study for each grade of the elementary and secondary schools and revise the same from time to time. In evaluating the course of study, consideration shall be given to the required basic content, texts used and available, the educational objective of the course, changing scientific, technological and cultural developments..."⁴

1983

[A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform](#) is published by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, documenting the decline in the U.S. education system and the need for reform.

1996

April: The Alabama State Board of Education appoints a Mathematics Course of Study Committee comprised of teachers and education professionals to update its mathematics standards.⁵

1996

[Achieve](#), an independent, bipartisan, non-profit education organization, is created by a group of governors and business leaders at the National Education Summit, encouraging states to adopt rigorous academic standards.

⁴ Ala. Code §16-35-3

⁵ Alabama State Board of Education, "Adopted Resolution to Appoint the Mathematics Course of Study Committee," April 11, 1996, http://www.alsde.edu/sites/boe/bdc/ALSDEBOE/BOE-Resolutions_3.aspx?ID=543, last accessed Feb. 26, 2014.

1997

February: The Alabama State Board of Education adopts its Mathematics Course of Study based on the recommendations of its Mathematics Course of Study Committee.⁶

1998

April: The Alabama State Board of Education appoints an English Language Arts Course of Study Committee to evaluate the state's English language arts standards.⁷

1999

February: The Alabama State Board of Education adopts its updated English Language Arts Course of Study based on the recommendations of its ELA Course of Study Committee.⁸

2001

December: The Alabama State Board of Education appoints a Mathematics Course of Study Committee comprised of teachers and education professionals to update its mathematics standards.⁹

⁶ ALSBOE, "Adopted Resolution for Adoption of Mathematics Course of Study," Feb 13, 1997,

http://www.alsde.edu/sites/boe/bdc/ALSDEBOE/BOE-Resolutions_3.aspx?ID=408, last accessed Feb. 26, 2014.

⁷ ALSBOE, "Adopted Resolution to Appoint the English Language Arts State Course of Study Committee," April 9, 1998,

http://www.alsde.edu/sites/boe/bdc/ALSDEBOE/BOE-Resolutions_3.aspx?ID=841, last accessed Feb. 26, 2014.

⁸ ALSBOE, "Resolution for Adoption of English Language Arts Education Course of Study," Feb. 11, 1999,

http://www.alsde.edu/sites/boe/bdc/ALSDEBOE/BOE-Resolutions_3.aspx?ID=226, last accessed Feb. 26, 2014.

⁹ ALSBOE, "Resolution to Appoint the Mathematics State Course of Study Committee," Dec. 13, 2001,

http://www.alsde.edu/sites/boe/bdc/ALSDEBOE/BOE-Resolutions_3.aspx?ID=384, last accessed Feb. 26, 2014.

2003

February: The Alabama State Board of Education adopts an updated Mathematics Course of Study recommended by its Mathematics Course of Study Committee of teachers and education professionals.¹⁰

2004

The report [*Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma that Counts*](#) is released by the American Diploma Project, illustrating significant concerns about the diminished quality of a high school diploma. The report found that a high school diploma “has lost value because graduates could not compete successfully beyond high school.”

2005

February: The [American Diploma Project \(ADP\)](#) Network is officially launched at the 2005 National Education Summit on High School to make college and career readiness a priority in the states, building upon the findings and recommendations of the *Ready or Not* report.

December: The Alabama State Board of Education appoints an English Language Arts Course of Study Committee to evaluate the state’s English language arts standards.¹¹

2007

February: The Alabama State Board of Education adopts an updated English Language Arts Course of Study based on the

recommendations of its ELA Course of Study Committee.¹²

February: Alabama receives an “F” from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce for “Academic Achievement,” and “Post-Secondary and Workforce Readiness,” and a “D” for “Truth in Advertising About Student Proficiency” in the report [*Leaders and Laggards: A State-by-State Report Card on Education Effectiveness*](#).

2008

February: The Alabama State Board of Education appoints a Mathematics Course of Study Committee comprised of teachers and education professionals to update its mathematics standards.¹³

December: The National Governors Association (NGA), Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), and Achieve release the report, [*Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education*](#) – a call to action for improving the U.S. education system and creating a set of common, internationally competitive academic standards.

The Common Core State Standards Initiative is officially launched and led by the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, Achieve, ACT, and The College Board.¹⁴

¹⁰ ALSBOE, “Resolution for Adoption of Mathematics, Health Education, and Physical Education State Courses of Study and the English Language Arts Course of Study Addendum (Reading), Feb. 13, 2003, http://www.alsde.edu/sites/boe/_bdc/ALSDEBOE/BOE-Resolutions_3.aspx?ID=773, last accessed Feb. 26, 2014.

¹¹ ALSBOE, “Resolution to Appoint the English Language Arts State Course of Study Committee,” Dec. 8, 2005, http://www.alsde.edu/sites/boe/_bdc/ALSDEBOE/BOE-Resolutions_3.aspx?ID=1107, last accessed Feb. 26, 2014.

¹² ALSBOE, “Resolution for Adoption of Language Arts and Driver and Traffic Safety Education State Courses of Study,” Feb. 8, 2007, http://www.alsde.edu/sites/boe/_bdc/ALSDEBOE/BOE-Resolutions_3.aspx?ID=1280 last accessed, Feb. 26, 2014.

¹³ ALSBOE, “Resolution to Appoint a Substitute Member to the Mathematics State Course of Study Committee,” May 8, 2008, http://www.alsde.edu/sites/boe/_bdc/ALSDEBOE/BOE-Resolutions_3.aspx?ID=1415, last accessed Feb. 26, 2014.

¹⁴ For more details on these organizations, see page six of this brief.

2009:

May: The Alabama State Board of Education adopts an updated Mathematics Course of Study recommended by its Mathematics Course of Study Committee of teachers and education professionals.¹⁵

May: The Alabama State Board of Education votes to join the Common Core State Standards Initiative to participate in development of new standards. The SBOE's resolution notes that "WHEREAS, the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) have committed to work together to create a state-led (not a federal government-led) effort to develop a common core of standards in English and Mathematics; and

"WHEREAS, any state that participates in development of the common core of standards is not bound to adopt or implement the standards if they are disagreeable with state policies and/or practices..."¹⁶

NGA and CCSSO announce the work groups for the standards.

September: The Alabama State Board of Education votes to phase out the Alabama High School Graduation Exam. Instead, the "Explore," "Plan" and "ACT" tests would be given in 8th, 10th, and 11th grades, respectively.

2010:

March: A draft of the Common Core State Standards is released for public feedback.

¹⁵ ALSBOE, "For Adoption of Mathematics Course of Study," http://www.alsde.edu/sites/boe/bdc/ALSDEBOE/BOE-Resolutions_3.aspx?ID=1530, last accessed Feb. 26, 2014.

¹⁶ ALSBOE, "To Participate in a State-led Common Set of Standards in English and Mathematics," http://www.alsde.edu/sites/boe/bdc/ALSDEBOE/BOE-Resolutions_3.aspx?ID=1531, last accessed Feb. 26, 2014.

Through two rounds of input, experts from the Alabama Reading Initiative and the Alabama Math, Science and Technology Initiative provided feedback to the developers of the Common Core State Standards.

June: The final version of the Common Core State Standards is released, and the Validation Committee reported that "the Common Core State Standards are based on best practices in national and international education, as well as research and input from numerous sources."

The Alabama State Board of Education reconvenes its Course of Study Committees in mathematics and English language arts to review the CCSS and compare them to Alabama's previously adopted sets of standards in math and English language arts.

November: After hearing recommendations from its Course of Study Committees, which had studied the final version of the CCSS and preferred them to the state's old Courses of Study, the Alabama State Board of Education votes to adopt the Common Core State Standards for mathematics and English language arts and add Alabama-specific standards to update Alabama's Courses of Study in math and English language arts.¹⁷

The SBOE's resolution notes that "the Alabama State Board of Education will continue to be the sole and exclusive entity vested with the authority, without restriction, to adopt or revoke all academic standards in all subjects for students in the public schools in the state of Alabama, including the Common Core State Standards, without direct or indirect pressure or coercion by the United States government or

¹⁷ ALSBOE, "Resolution to Adopt the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics," Nov. 18, 2010, http://www.alsde.edu/sites/boe/bdc/ALSDEBOE/BOE-Resolutions_3.aspx?ID=1679, last accessed Feb. 26, 2014.

any of its subdivisions and the Alabama State Board of Education will be kept apprised of any such activity.”

This vote follows three SBOE work sessions and four public hearings in Mobile, Montgomery, Birmingham, and Decatur allowing citizens to share their thoughts about Alabama’s new academic standards. This was the first time in Alabama’s history that the SBOE traveled across the state to listen to citizens prior to updating its academic standards.

2011:

The Alabama State Department of Education begins professional development for teachers, preparing them to teach students at higher levels in order to prepare for the Common Core State Standards that encourage more critical thinking than Alabama’s previous standards.

November: The Alabama State Board of Education affirms its authority over educational matters in Alabama and renames the Common Core State Standards the Alabama College and Career Ready Standards to reflect its ownership over the standards and that it added Alabama-specific standards.

The resolution states, “BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That the Alabama State Board of Education does reaffirm the language in the November 18, 2010, resolution that states, ‘the Alabama State Board of Education will continue to be the sole and exclusive entity vested with the authority, without restriction, to

adopt or revoke all academic standards in all subjects for students in the public schools of the state of Alabama, including the Common Core State Standards, without direct or indirect pressure or coercion by the United States government or any of its subdivisions and the Alabama State Board of Education will be kept apprised of any such activity.’”¹⁸

2012:

The Alabama State Department of Education reorganizes to focus on supporting schools in addition to assuring compliance, and the ALSDE continues professional development for educators in order to help them improve their craft and prepare for teaching students at higher levels with the College and Career Ready Standards.

August: Alabama begins implementing the College and Career Ready Standards in mathematics in grades K-12.

2013:

The Alabama State Department of Education’s regional teams and local school districts continue providing professional development for educators as they learn to better foster critical thinking skills among students.

April: The Alabama State Board of Education votes to replace the Alabama Reading and Math Test with the ACT Aspire test in grades

Standards vs. Curriculum

- **Standards** are written guidelines for what students are expected to know and be able to do at a specific point in their education. Standards provide the foundation for key components of the education system including curricula, instructional materials, teacher training, and assessments.
- A **Curriculum** is how those standards are taught. Local districts make decisions regarding curriculum, and teachers and principals choose instructional strategies and materials.

¹⁸ ALSBOE, “To Affirm Alabama’s College-and Career-Ready Standards for Mathematics and English Language Arts,” Nov. 10, 2011, http://www.alsde.edu/sites/boe/bdc/ALSDEBOE/BOE-Resolutions_3.aspx?ID=1829, last accessed Feb. 26, 2014.

3-8, complementing the ACT battery of tests given in the upper grades. This confirms Alabama's decision to not participate with either of the two consortia of states developing assessments based on the Common Core State Standards.

August: Alabama begins implementing the College and Career Ready Standards in English language arts in grades K-12.

November: SBOE rescinds its May 2009 Memorandum of Agreement with the NGA and CCSSO to engage in development of the standards. The new resolution states, "In adopting the Alabama College- and Career-Ready Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics, the Alabama State Board of Education reaffirmed its authority over the governance of said standards and clearly stated its opposition to any undue involvement or influence from the United State Department of Education or other outside entity."¹⁹

2014:

January: SBOE makes changes to the College and Career Ready Standards after a "mid-implementation review" based on input from Alabama teachers and leaders who originally advised adopting the standards in 2010. This revision includes a removal of exemplars "incorrectly referred to as a required Common Core reading list." The SBOE did not ask for or receive permission from any outside entity to make these adjustments to its academic standards.²⁰

April: Alabama students begin using the Aspire tests in math and reading.

Overview of Academic Standards

Academic standards are written guidelines that outline what students are expected to be able to do at specific points in their education. Standards are usually organized by subject areas and grade levels, but they may also include long-term education goals. Individual states are responsible for setting the academic standards for their students. While the standards set specific expectations for students, it is the curriculum that determines how those standards are taught. **In Alabama, the State Board of Education approves statewide academic standards, and local school districts and teachers determine curricula and choose instructional materials (such as text books) that align with the state standards.**

In the past, states have not worked together to establish academic expectations. This has led to wide variation in the quality of standards across the country. Students could have met expectations for fifth grade math as measured by Alabama's exams, but fail the same subject and grade based on another state's standards. Establishing a set of shared, academically rigorous standards helps ensure that students, regardless of where they live, have the opportunity to receive a strong education and multiple pathways to achieve success after high school.

¹⁹ ALSBOE, "Affirming Alabama Control of the Alabama College- and Career-Ready Standards," Nov. 14, 2013, http://www.alsde.edu/sites/boe/_bdc/ALSDEBOE/BOE_-_Resolutions_3.aspx?ID=2044, last accessed Feb. 26, 2014.

²⁰ Tommy Bice, "Fact is, Alabama remains firmly in control of out public schools (Opinion from State School Superintendent Tommy Bice)," Feb. 23, 2014, http://www.al.com/opinion/index.ssf/2014/02/facts_is_alabama_re_mains_firml.html, last accessed Feb. 26, 2014.

Raising Academic Standards in Alabama

States began to push for higher academic standards in 1996, when a bipartisan group of governors and business leaders from across the country came together at the National Education Summit and helped launch the non-profit organization, Achieve. Since that time, Achieve has encouraged states to adopt rigorous academic standards to help U.S. students compete in the global economy. As part of its work to make college and career readiness a priority in states, the group launched the American Diploma Project Network in 2005. Shortly after it was founded, Alabama joined the ADP Network under the leadership of Governor Bob Riley and Superintendent Joe Morton.

In February 2007, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce issued a report on the rigor of each state's academic standards. It gave Alabama an "F" in Academic Achievement and Post-Secondary and Workforce Readiness, and a "D" in Truth in Advertising About Student Proficiency.

Every two years, Alabama students' levels of proficiency on the Alabama Reading and Math Test (ARMT) are two to three times higher than the levels of proficiency on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading and math, a national test referred to as the "Nation's Report Card" given every two years to a random sampling of students nationwide.

Improving College and Career Readiness in Alabama

In 2009 the Alabama State Board of Education (SBOE) began a concerted effort to raise higher expectations for Alabama students in order to prepare them for the next step after graduating from high school, whether that was entering college or going straight into a career. 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 9-12.²¹ 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.

In May of 2009, the SBOE voted to join the Common Core State Standards Initiative to participate in development of new standards with the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices. (Then-Gov. Bob Riley and then-State Superintendent Joe Morton were members of these organizations, respectively, and currently Gov. Robert Bentley and State Supt. Tommy Bice, are also members by virtue of their offices.) The purpose was to create high-level academic standards that could be shared across multiple states. They were designed to:

- Align with expectations for entering college or the workforce,

²¹ State Superintendent Thomas R. Bice to City and County Superintendents, July 11, 2012, Alabama State Department of Education, Phasing Out the Alabama High School Graduation Exam.

- Include rigorous content and application of knowledge through higher-order skills,
- And build upon the strengths of current state standards, as well as those from top-performing countries.

Groups with expertise in this area were enlisted to help lead the process, including ACT, the College Board, and Achieve. These organizations brought together teams that included leading education scholars from across the nation. The following are brief descriptions of each of the lead groups:

- The **National Governors Association** was founded in 1908 as a bipartisan organization of the nation’s governors to “share best practices, speak with a collective voice on national policy and develop innovative solutions that improve state government and support the principles of federalism. Its members include governors of the 55 states, territories and commonwealths. The NGA Center for Best Practices provides “innovative solutions to public policy challenges...and technical assistance to both new and incumbent governors.”²²
- The **Council of Chief State School Officers** is “is a nonpartisan, nationwide, nonprofit organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, the Department of

To read the full standards:

- [Alabama Course of Study for Math](#)
- [Alabama Course of Study English language arts](#)
- [Common Core State Standards for Mathematics](#)
- [Common Core State Standards for English language arts](#)

Defense Education Activity, and five U.S. extra-state jurisdictions.”²³

- **Achieve** is a nonpartisan, non-profit organization founded in 1996 by a bipartisan group of governors and business leaders. It focuses on working with states to raise academic standards and graduation requirements.²⁴

- **ACT**, founded in 1959, as “American College Testing,” is a non-profit organization with a stated mission of “helping people achieve education and workplace success.” It is best known for its college admissions and placement test, and it also develops other assessments related to college and workplace readiness.²⁵

- **The College Board**, founded in 1900 by 12 colleges and universities, was “created to expand access to higher education.” Today it “promotes excellence and equity in education through programs for K-12 and higher education... by providing students a path to college opportunities...”²⁶

During development of the standards, work groups developed the specific standards for the end of high school that would indicate college and career readiness (defined as the ability to succeed in entry-level postsecondary classes

²³ “Who We Are,” Council of Chief State School Officers, http://www.ccsso.org/Who_We_Are.html, last accessed Feb. 4, 2014.

²⁴ “About Us,” Achieve, <http://www.achieve.org/about-us>, last accessed Feb. 4, 2014.

²⁵ “About ACT,” ACT, <http://www.act.org/about-us/>, last accessed Feb. 4, 2014.

²⁶ “About Us,” The College Board, <http://about.collegeboard.org>, last accessed Feb. 4, 2014.

²² “About,” National Governors Association, <http://www.nga.org/cms/about>, last accessed Feb. 4, 2014.

without remediation). These end-of-school standards then guided development of grade-level standards for kindergarten through 11th grade.²⁷ For this part of the work, CCSSO and NGA brought together two work teams that included people with “expertise in assessment, curriculum design, cognitive development, child development, and English-language acquisition.” There were 50 members on the Common Core English Language Arts Work Team, with a separate 12-member group providing feedback on the standards. Additionally, a team of 51 individuals worked to develop the math CCSS, with another group of 22 individuals providing feedback.²⁸

In March 2010, a draft of the Common Core State Standards was released for public feedback. Through two rounds of input, experts from the Alabama Reading Initiative and the Alabama Math, Science and Technology Initiative provided feedback to the developers of the CCSS. In June, the final version of the CCSS was released, and the Validation Committee reported that, “the Common Core State Standards are based on best practices in national and international education, as well as research and input from numerous sources.”²⁹

To date, **45 states and the Department of Defense Education Activity have adopted academic standards based on the CCSS.**³⁰

Alabama’s College and Career Ready Standards

In November 2010 the Alabama State Board of Education adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for mathematics and English language arts based on recommendations of its Course of Study committees, which are legally required to update material for Alabama’s courses. **Before adopting the CCSS, the SBOE held four public hearings across the state—enhanced by a publicly mandated comment period—to gather input from Alabama teachers, parents, and citizens. This was the first time in Alabama’s history that the SBOE traveled across the state to listen to citizens prior to updating its academic standards.**

In November 2011, the SBOE affirmed its adoption of the standards and renamed them the Alabama College and Career Ready Standards (CCRS),³¹ reflecting the state’s total authority over its academic standards and ability to adapt them as necessary to provide Alabama students with the best academic standards for their needs. **Through this work, the SBOE has worked to ensure the standards provide a solid foundation to raise student achievement and eliminate the need for remediation before entering college or the workforce.**³²

²⁷ Robert Rothman, “Something in Common: the Common Core State Standards and the Next Chapter in American Education,” Harvard Education Letter Impact Series, 2012.

²⁸ National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, Common Core State Standards Initiative K-12 Standards Development Teams, <http://nga.org/files/live/sites/NGA/files/pdf/2010COMMONCOREK12TEAM.PDF> (last accessed January 13, 2014).

²⁹ Common Core State Standards Initiative, *Reaching Higher, The Common Core State Standards Validation Committee: A Report from the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & The Council of Chief State School Officers*, June 2010, http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CommonCoreReport_6.10.pdf (last accessed January 14, 2014.)

³⁰ “In the States,” Common Core State Standards Initiative, <http://www.corestandards.org/in-the-states>, last accessed Jan. 28, 2014.

³¹ ALSBOE, “To Affirm Alabama’s College-and Career-Ready Standards for Mathematics and English Language Arts.”

³² ALSBOE, “Resolution to Adopt the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics.”

During the 2012-13 academic year, schools across Alabama started officially implementing the new math standards. In the 2013-14 school year, schools are officially implementing the new English language arts standards.³³ However, the ALSDE and many local systems have been providing professional development to teachers and administrators for several years to help them improve their skills and ability to teach the critical thinking skills needed to master the new College and Career Ready Standards.

The purpose of Alabama’s College and Career Ready Standards is to move away from rote memorization and “teaching to a test.” Instead, the CCRS go beyond memorization to increase academic rigor, critical thinking and real learning for real life in math and language arts.³⁴

The conservative Thomas B. Fordham Institute, which has long called for raising academic standards, reviewed and graded all states’ standards and the Common Core State Standards, on which Alabama’s CCRS are based, for its report [*The State of the Standards—and the Common Core—in 2010*](#).

Fordham gave Alabama’s old academic standards a “B+ in math and a “B” in English language arts, but it gave the Common Core State Standards an “A-“ in math, and a “B+” in English language arts.³⁵

³³ “Alabama College- & Career-Ready Standards (CCRS),” Alabama Learning Exchange, <http://alex.state.al.us/ccrs/>, last accessed Jan. 28, 2014.

³⁴ “Information: Common Misconceptions,” Foundation for Excellence in Education, <http://excelined.org/policy-library/common-core-toolkit/information-common-misconceptions/>, last accessed Jan. 28, 2014.

³⁵ Sheila Byrd Carmichael, W. Stephen Wilson, Kathleen Porter-Magee, Gabrielle Martino, *The State of the Standards—and the Common Core—in 2010: Alabama*, 2010, Thomas B. Fordham Institute,

Just like previous sets of Alabama standards, school systems still develop their own curricula, and teachers still develop their own lesson plans. The standards are simply benchmarks outlining what students should be able to accomplish in that subject by specific grade levels.³⁶ The SBOE is the sole authority on the standards upon which teachers base their lesson plans.^{37, 38}

Teachers and students have met the challenge of the increased rigor with enthusiasm and have welcomed the changes. **Nationally, polls conducted by numerous organizations found strong support for the standards among teachers and administrators:**

- A May 2013 poll of 800 teachers by the American Federation of Teachers found 75% of teachers support the CCSS.
- A September 2013 poll of National Education Association members found more than 75% supported the CCSS.
- The 2013 Education Next Survey found 76% of teacher strongly or somewhat support adoption of the CCSS.
- A 2013 Primary Sources survey of 20,000 teachers found 73% of math, English, science and/or social studies teachers are “enthusiastic” about implementation of the CCSS in their classrooms.

http://edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2010/201007_state_education_standards_common_standards/Alabama.pdf, last accessed Jan. 2, 2014.

³⁶ “Information: Common Misconceptions,” Foundation for Excellence in Education.

³⁷ ALSBOE, “Resolution to Adopt the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics.”

³⁸ ALSBOE, “To Affirm Alabama’s College-and Career-Ready Standards for Mathematics and English Language Arts.”

- A recent survey of 1,100 principals from 14 CCSS states found that more than 80% “agree that the Common Core has the potential to improve conceptual understanding, increase student skill mastery and create more meaningful assessments of students.”
- A June 2013 Gallup/Education Week poll of superintendents showed 58% think the CCSS will improve the quality of education in their community and 75% believe the standards will provide more consistency in quality between districts and states.³⁹

Through A+’s work with teachers across Alabama, we have heard anecdotes about teachers’ experiences with the standards. 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.*⁴⁰

³⁹ “Do Teachers Like Common Core State Standards?” A+ Blog, Feb. 4, 2014, A+ Education Partnership, <http://www.aplusala.org/blog/do-teachers-like-common-core-state-standards>, last accessed Feb. 4, 2014.

⁴⁰ 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.

Parents also appreciate the College and Career Ready Standards in Alabama, and the Common Core State Standards nationally. A statewide poll conducted in June 2013 found that households with school-aged children favored the College and Career Ready Standards by a two-to-one ratio.⁴¹ Nationally, the numbers are similar. The journal *Education Next* conducted a survey that oversampled parents of school-aged children, and reported that, “Adoption of the Common Core is in fact one of the most popular reform proposals about which we inquired.”⁴²

Assessing Student Learning⁴³

In tandem with the work to implement higher standards in Alabama, the state is working to assess student learning on the new standards. The transition to more rigorous standards through the Alabama College and Career Ready Standards parallels changes to Alabama’s assessment program for grades 3-8 and high school. Now, as the state continues to implement higher expectations for all students through the College and Career Ready Standards, schools are preparing to administer new assessments designed by ACT in math and English language arts for grades three through 11, complementing the familiar tests already in use from ACT.

ACT Aspire

In April 2013 the Alabama State Board of Education (SBOE) adopted the ACT Aspire

⁴¹ Thomas Rains, Jr. and Becky Vansant, “Why the Alabama PTA Supports the Common Core (Opinion),” AL.com, October 6, 2013, http://www.al.com/opinion/index.ssf/2013/10/why_the_alabama_pta_strongly_s.html (last accessed January 13, 2014).

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ This section is adapted from *Standardized Testing in Alabama and Nationwide*, A+ Education Partnership, December 2013, http://www.aplusala.org/uploadedFiles/File/A_testing_memo.pdf (last accessed Jan. 28, 2014).

tests for end-of-year assessments to replace the Alabama Reading and Math Test for grades 3-8.⁴⁴ Aspire is developed by the non-profit organization ACT, which also administers the college-readiness test of the same name. The Aspire tests will be 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 2013-14 school year will be the first year of the Aspire tests.

Using Aspire in the lower grades will complement Alabama’s assessment improvements in the upper grades. The upper-grade assessments include three different batteries of assessments, each addressing different skill sets:

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

End of Course Tests

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 9-12.⁴⁵ 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. That same year, Alabama high schools began administering EOCs in a limited number of subjects and did not include the scores as a percentage of students’ grades. This was meant to inform future decisions regarding the assessments’ use.⁴⁶ **Beginning with the 2013-14 school year, high schools will administer EOCs in Algebra I and English 10.**⁴⁷

EOCs will expand in 2014-15 to include:

English 9	English 10
English 11	English 12
Algebra I	Geometry
Algebra II	Pre-Calculus
Biology	Chemistry
Physics	U.S. History ⁴⁸

ACT College Readiness System

Simultaneously, **2013-14 marks the first school year that all juniors in Alabama (the Class of 2015) will take the ACT college readiness test, the capstone in the ACT College and Career Readiness System.** Last year, all members of the Class of 2015 took ACT’s “Plan” test as sophomores, and as 8th graders they took ACT’s “Explore” test. This three-test battery over four years tracks 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 table next page).⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Bice to Superintendents, Oct. 19, 2012, ALSDE, Clarifications.

⁴⁷ Bice to Superintendents, July 12, 2013, ALSDE, Revisions to the Testing Program and Testing Dates.

⁴⁸ Bice to Superintendents, January 22, 2013, ALSDE, Revisions to the 2012-13, 2013-14, and 2014-15 Testing Dates.

⁴⁹ “ACT College Readiness Benchmarks,” ACT, accessed Oct. 14, 2013, <http://www.act.org/solutions/college-career-readiness/college-readiness-benchmarks/>.

⁴⁴ 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.

⁴⁵ Bice to Superintendents, July 11, 2012, ALSDE, Phasing Out the Alabama High School Graduation Exam.

ACT Subject-Area Test	ACT Explore (8th)	ACT Plan (10th)	The ACT Benchmark (11 th)
English	13	15	18
Mathematics	17	19	22
Reading	16	18	22
Science	18	20	23

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.”⁵⁰

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%.⁵¹
- In 2012, 18% of Alabama’s graduating seniors who took the ACT met all four College Readiness Benchmarks. Nationally, 25% met all four benchmarks.⁵²

By giving all juniors the opportunity to take the ACT, Alabama is joining a growing number of

⁵⁰ Ibid.
⁵¹ 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.
⁵² Ibid.

states seeking to give students and their families honest feedback on how well-prepared they are for college.⁵³ Many states are now paying for its students to take one or more other tests developed by ACT.

ACT WorkKeys

Beginning in 2014-15 seniors in Alabama will also be able to take ACT WorkKeys assessments.⁵⁴ 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.”⁵⁵ 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
- Performance⁵⁶

⁵³ 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.

⁵⁴ Bice to Superintendents, July 11, 2012, ALSDE, Phasing Out the Alabama High School Graduation Exam.

⁵⁵ Overview, ACT WorkKeys, <http://www.act.org/products/workforce-act-workkeys/>, last accessed Oct. 22, 2013.

⁵⁶ ACT WorkKeys FAQ, ACT, <http://www.act.org/workkeys/assess/faq.html>, last accessed Oct. 23, 2013.

With these changes in assessments, Alabama is likely to experience a drop in standardized test scores in 2014. This 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.

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.

Alabama is not alone. Forty-six other states and the District of Columbia adopted some version 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 2012.⁵⁷ The same happened in New York this year.⁵⁸ **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—including Alabama-- will climb in future years.

Looking Ahead

Alabama students are making progress. To accelerate and sustain this progress will require continued support for teachers and schools. Ongoing training and support will help teachers meet the challenge of higher standards. It is critical that we provide teacher and administrators with opportunities to reflect on best practices, share with their colleagues, and learn from one another.

Additionally, as expectations of our state’s graduates climb in the future, Alabama’s standards will also have to continue to rise and keep pace, just as they have for decades. The state must continue to review and update its academic standards as needed to ensure all students graduate from Alabama high schools ready for real life, whether they are entering college or going straight into a career.

⁵⁷ 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.

⁵⁸ 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_intereesting_aspect_of.html, last accessed Oct. 14, 2013.