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General questions/arrange interviews

Eighth-grade ISAT standards not aligned with high school demands, college readiness

Students need good grades, high schools with strong academic cultures to keep from 'treading water'

Students who just meet Illinois testing standards in eighth grade have virtually no chance of scoring a 20 or above on the ACT, according to a study released Friday by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago.

This finding points to a “major misalignment” between the standards set by the state ISAT tests in elementary school and the college-readiness standards expected of all juniors in Illinois high schools as measured by the ACT, which is part of the state’s PSAE exams. It takes a score into the Exceeds Standards category on the eighth-grade ISAT to have a relatively good shot at scoring well on the ACT in eleventh grade.

The study, *From High School to the Future: The Pathway to 20*, was inspired by a new goal in Chicago Public Schools to have their juniors reach a goal of 20 or above on the ACT. It was based on a longitudinal analysis of more than 40,000 students from three junior classes (2005, 2006 and 2007) in Chicago Public Schools. An ACT score of 20 is actually lower than the state average and college-readiness benchmarks set by ACT, but was seen as a realistic goal for Chicago students because graduates with this score or better have a good chance of being accepted into Illinois state universities.

“Having such low academic standards in eighth grade serves no one well, least of all the students who eke through and then are surprised to find themselves unprepared to do well in high school, let alone college,” wrote John Easton, executive director at the Consortium and the study’s lead author. “Perhaps we are sending students and schools the wrong message about the adequacy of elementary students academic preparation, especially for the vast majority of students who have their eyes on college in the future.”

To understand the pathway to 20, researchers also tracked back from the ACT to see students’ progress on prior tests. In addition to the ACT, all CPS high school students also take two other tests developed by ACT. These tests, the EXPLORE and PLAN, along with the ACT, make up EPAS—the Education Planning and Assessment System. The EPAS system is now used widely in other Illinois high schools.

The key findings include:

- An ISAT math score of 267—the median score for Illinois eighth-graders in 2006--results in about a 26 percent chance of reaching a 20 on the ACT three years later, based on this analysis. For those students just barely meeting standards (a math score of 246), only 3 percent scored a 20 or above on the ACT. (The analysis focused on ISAT math scores because math is a slightly stronger predictor of the ACT composite than ISAT reading scores, but the relationship holds equally well with reading scores).
- For those students who just inch their way into the Exceeds Standards category with a score of 288, the probability of reaching 20 is about 62 percent.
- The average ACT score for students who “meet standards” is 17.5 (very close to the CPS average), and a very small portion of them reach 20. Only students in the “exceeds” category have an average ACT score above 20 (average is 23.3), and most of them reach 20.
- Students’ ninth-grade EXPLORE composite scores also strongly predict whether they will reach a 20 or better on the ACT. Virtually no students with very low scores (15 and below) on EXPLORE make it to 20 on ACT. About 30 percent of students who scored 16 on ninth grade EXPLORE (the national average) reached 20 on the ACT. Virtually all students with high EXPLORE scores (18 and above) make it to 20 on the ACT.

While previous achievement test scores **predict** ACT scores, they do not **determine** them. There are many students who start in the same place but end up different from each other, the study found. It is students’ school experiences that play such a strong role in determining academic achievement.

To understand those school experiences, the report also builds on key findings revealed in recent Consortium research that has delved deeply into other factors that influence students’ success in high school and their college readiness:

- In *What Matters for Staying On-Track and Graduating in Chicago Public High Schools*, the authors show how the academic culture of high schools affect freshman attendance rates, freshman failure rates, and freshman grade point averages. Indicators of positive student and teacher relationships have strong positive impacts on all three student outcomes. In schools where there are strong reports from students on **student-teacher trust**, freshmen have 2.30 fewer days absent per semester, 0.78 fewer failures per semester, and their grade point averages are 0.23 points higher than students with similar background characteristics (including prior test scores) who attend similar schools.
- Students who attend high schools with a strong academic climate and earn better grades gained more than twice as much on the EPAS test as their peers in the weaker schools and with lower grades. When analyzing all students who started with a 17 on the EXPLORE test, those in the first group improved 3.7 points on their ACT, while the second group only gained 1.4 points. “Strong high schools” are those in which relationships between teachers and students are stronger, there is greater academic press on students, students learn that doing well in high school matters for the future, and their teachers encourage and support their interest in going to college and help them get there.

“Simply raising standards for students in CPS or state-wide is not a solution,” Easton writes. “We see very strong students who do not reach even 20 on the ACT. This is a less an indictment of the standards than an indication that there are strong students who are being ill served by their high schools. We should have high expectations for our schools as well as for students. And our expectations for strong performance by all students need to start early in the elementary grades, if not in preschool.”

Founded in 1990, the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago conducts research of high technical quality that influences policy and practice in Chicago and nationwide.