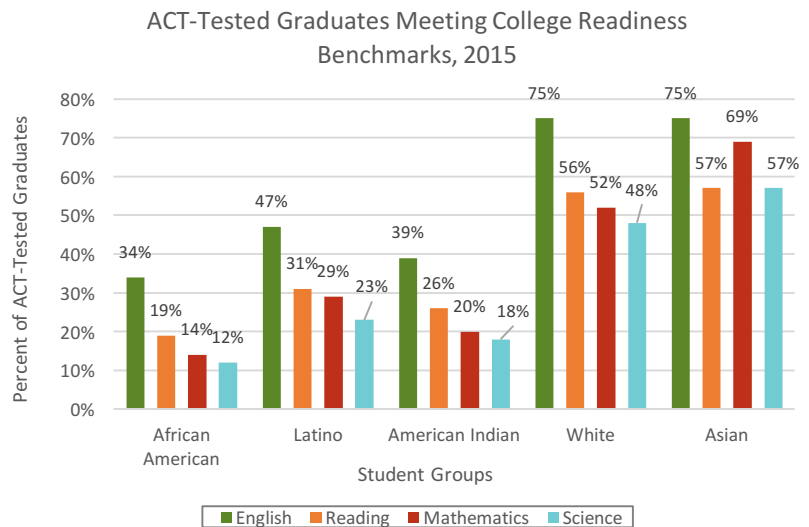


# ASSESSMENT-BASED MEASURES OF COLLEGE READINESS

## An Overview

Assessment-based measures of college readiness are tests that measure student preparation for postsecondary education, the most notable examples being the SAT and ACT. Many colleges use these tests as part of their admission requirements, and lack of access to these assessments or low results can prevent students from getting into the school of their choice.

Data show that despite some progress in recent years, historically underserved students are less likely to take these assessments. On average, results for historically underserved students also tend to be lower, indicating insufficient preparation through high school.



*NOTE: This fact sheet highlights benefits and considerations related to using college readiness assessments, such as the ACT or SAT, in addition to (not in place of) a high school statewide annual assessment. Additional questions/warnings apply if your state is considering replacing the statewide assessment with one of these tests.*

## How is it measured?

When looking at indicators related to college readiness assessments like the ACT or SAT, it's important to measure two things:

1. Participation: The percentage of students taking the assessment (unless participation is mandatory); and
2. Success: The results on these assessments, which may be measured as the percentage of students meeting college readiness benchmarks or average scores.

## What do the research/data tell us?

1. On average, schools show lower results on college entrance exams for historically underserved students — including students of color, low-income students, and students with disabilities — than for their peers.<sup>1</sup> In states where participation is not mandatory, schools also show lower participation rates for historically underserved students.<sup>2</sup>
2. Schools with higher proficiency rates on state assessments tend to show higher results (both in terms of participation and scores) on college entrance exams. However, there are schools with high proficiency rates, but low participation or low results on these exams, especially for historically underserved groups.
3. On average, schools with higher *participation* rates also show higher *success rates* on college entrance exams, and vice versa. But there are schools with high participation and low success rates, or low participation and high success rates, both for all students and for different groups of students.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ACT, *The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2015*, <http://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/Condition-of-College-and-Career-Readiness-Report-2015-United-States.pdf> and College Board, 2015, *2015 College-Bound Seniors, Total Group Profile Report*, <https://secure-media.collegeboard.org/digitalServices/pdf/sat/total-group-2015.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Jeff Allen, "Anticipated Changes in ACT Scores and Participation Rates with ACT Statewide Adoption," *ACT Research and Policy*, March 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Based on an Education Trust analysis of data from the Massachusetts Department of Education.

## What are the benefits and risks of including this measure in a school rating system?

### Benefits

- ACT/SAT are tests that matter for high school students, often resulting in greater effort.
- Including these indicators in accountability may get schools to put systems in place to make registering for the SAT/ACT easier/more accessible, and may incentivize them to help all students prepare for these assessments.
- Because these assessments are not state-created, they may provide an additional, external check on student outcomes.

### Considerations/Warnings

- There is a cost to taking these tests. Without subsidies, low participation rates may be an indicator of students' inability to afford them, rather than of something with the school.
  - The College Board and ACT do provide some fee waivers for qualifying low-income students, but the responsibility to obtain the waiver should not fall on the students.
- The prevalence of SAT/ACT prep in wealthy schools/districts may give those schools an extra (and unfair) advantage.
- If appropriate accommodations for English learners and students with disabilities are not available, these assessments may systematically disadvantage these groups of students.

## If your state is considering including assessment-based measures of college readiness in school ratings, what questions should you ask? What should you watch out for?

### What types of assessments will the state include?

ACT and SAT are the most commonly used college entry exams, but the state may wish to include other measures such as an assessment that institutions of higher education use for placement in credit-bearing coursework. States need to ensure that whatever assessments they use are meaningful to students and include appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities and English learners.

### Should a state focus on participation rates, success rates, or both?

Unless participation is mandatory, states that choose to include college readiness tests in school ratings need to consider both participation and success rates. Including only participation rates will not provide schools with sufficient incentive to prepare students for them. And including only success rates would incentivize schools to restrict access to the assessments to just the perceived highest performers.

### How will participation and success be measured?

**Participation:** How will the state address students who take an assessment like the SAT or ACT multiple times? And who will form the participation rate denominator — all students in the cohort? Just 11th- and 12th-graders? Just graduates?

- **Tip:** Watch out for attempts to include only graduates in the participation rate denominator. Doing so could increase the incentive to push lower performing students out of school entirely.

**Success:** States can measure success on college readiness assessments using average scores or percentages of students meeting readiness benchmarks. Both College Board and ACT have identified cut scores on their assessments that, based on extensive research, predict a high likelihood of success in credit-bearing college classes. Watch out for attempts to set a lower benchmark for the purposes of accountability, unless those cut scores are being raised over time.