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Can ACT Improve the Pipeline?

When Illinois lawmakers mandated in 2001 that all high school juniors — college-bound or not — take the ACT exam, the state was delving into uncharted waters.

Could students who didn't intend on going on to college be encouraged to do so upon taking the test? Could the plan help students become more college-ready?

The answer to both questions appears to be a resounding "yes." According to the most recent data provided by ACT, the number of in-state, ACT-tested fall freshmen enrolled in Illinois colleges in 2002 was up by 24 percent compared to the previous year. The state's average ACT composite score rose from 20.1 in 2002 to 20.2 in 2003, despite an increase in the number of students tested. According to many state educators, the addition of the ACT in conjunction with state-developed assessments can be directly tied to such successes.

In recent years, state policy makers have wrestled with ways to best measure the performance and college readiness of their high school students. There have been a range of approaches nationwide, including widely praised programs like the MCAS in Massachusetts. But other states have struggled to create tests that educators and policy makers agree are measuring what they are supposed to be measuring. In this context, there has been a growing movement to use the ACT — a longstanding and well-respected testing measure — as a tool to supplement or replace existing state-created tests.

Like Illinois, Colorado instituted an ACT-based plan in 2001, and Michigan will begin a pilot program this year, details of which are still being ironed out. Meanwhile, Kentucky and Missouri lawmakers are now considering the option. But policy experts say that while implementing the ACT as a statewide assessment has shown promise, it is not the test alone that makes the difference.

"High schools can use a college entrance test for their assessments, but they need to align their curricula and standards to the test," says Michael Kirst, a professor of education at Stanford University and former president of the California State Board of Education. "I'm worried that some states would not properly align their curricula and standards."

While Kirst says that Illinois educators have paid particular attention to that aspect of their ACT implementation, Colorado, he suggests, has not fared as well. He says that Colorado has "laid the ACT on top" of their already established standards, which might not serve students or institutions well in terms of remediation costs. Still, the number of Colorado high school graduates earning an ACT composite score of at least 18 (the low end of the range for admission to colleges with liberal admission policies) was 42 percent higher in 2003 than in 2001.

Jon Erickson, ACT's vice president of educational services, says that lawmakers in Colorado and Illinois had different reasons for instituting plans that made the ACT mandatory for high school students. Colorado's focus, he says, was to help ease the transition to higher education for students who wouldn't normally go on to college, while Illinois's primary goal was to increase the achievement of students while in secondary education.

"More states are looking for something with external credibility to increase student motivation and performance," says Erickson. "Colorado's plan is probably a little simpler, but we support a state no matter what model fits them best."

Robert A. Schaeffer, director of FairTest, a standardized testing watchdog group, says that he is not surprised that ACT officials are so supportive. "They are trying to sell a product," he says. "They want to get as many states as possible to adopt mandatory testing in high school."

“Both ACT and the College Board” — which sponsors the SAT — “are going to pitch it as a way to consolidate,” adds Schaeffer. “But if a state, like Illinois, doesn’t drop existing tests, it’s not a cost savings.”

Schaeffer argues that instead of partnering with ACT, lawmakers could better spend dollars on trying to reach out to student populations that are already known not to normally head for college.

Erickson doesn’t dispute that having more states adopt mandatory high school ACT testing would be a money maker for his organization. “But, believe it or not, we’re not bottom-line driven,” he says. “Our philosophical roots are in building assessments that aid students.”

Peter Ewell, vice president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, says that ACT is coming close to defining what it means to be college-ready, but he would prefer to see high schools utilize subject-specific tests that colleges use to decide where to place students once they enroll. He supports a new California State University program that allows high school juniors to voluntarily elect to take additional math and English tests, created by the university, that help college officials have a rapport with high schools on whether students are ready for high school. Cal State faculty members and high school teachers are now collaborating to create 12th-grade courses for students whose performance on the voluntary tests indicate that they are not prepared for college-level instruction.

Paul Lingenfelter, president of the State Higher Education Executive Officers, says that he doesn’t see any problems with states requiring an existing standardized test as an assessment for their high school students. “I’m not endorsing the ACT per se,” he says. “I don’t want anybody to have a monopoly.”

Lingenfelter also adds that he think teaching to any test is a bad idea. “You shouldn’t put too much high stakes on any single assessment,” he says. “There is no perfect test.”

— [Rob Capriccioso](#)

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