

Bucking the national assessment trend, Alabama and others are using a new exam from ACT Aspire to make sure students as young as third grade are on a path to college or a career



A New Alternative to College and Career Readiness Testing

As Alabama officials were drafting a plan in 2012 to transform the state's public education system, they asked for input from the business community and two- and four-year colleges and universities.

State officials wanted to know: What are the key skills you need from students and employees?

A majority of those institutions were already using the ACT college entrance exam or the ACT WorkKeys job skills assessment to measure college and career readiness, said Alabama State Superintendent Thomas Bice.

So when Bice learned that ACT was teaming up with Pearson to develop a new exam that could tell whether students in the earlier grades were on a path toward college and career readiness as well, it seemed like the perfect fit for his state.

Implementing such an exam "would give us ... the first truly aligned system for grades three through college and beyond," he said.

ACT's partnership with Pearson has resulted in a new company, ACT Aspire, and an exam by the same name: a digital, longitudinal assessment system that connects student performance with college and career readiness benchmarks from elementary school to early high school.

Alabama has adopted this exam as its state test for students in grades three to high school, and it's not alone: This year, Wisconsin will be rolling out the ACT Aspire exam in grades nine and 10, and the company has contracts with greater than 1,300 other accounts in 46 states so far.

As the national debate over the Common Core State

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Standards continues, and some state leaders reevaluate their participation in the PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments, that number could continue to climb.

“Why not us?” asks Kevin Howell, president and CEO of ACT Aspire. “Why not have ACT Aspire become that exam, anchored on the leading college readiness assessment in the nation?”

Building an exam from college readiness benchmarks

ACT is widely considered a leader in college and career readiness, having published its first research findings on this topic nearly three decades ago.

Officers began forming state consortia to develop tests for the Common Core, “We didn’t think anyone could build a better college and career readiness system than us,” Howell said.

ACT already had a decades-long history of working with Pearson to build high-stakes assessments, and the two organizations founded ACT Aspire to create the exam in 2012.

Available online or in a pencil-and-paper format, the ACT Aspire assessment tests whether students in grades three through high school are on the path toward college or career readiness, need intervention, or need remediation in five subject areas: reading, writing, English language arts, math, and science.

“The idea is to identify this as early on as possible, to get students on the path to success,” Howell said.

Imagine you’re in high school.

With the ACT Aspire exam joining the ACT and ACT WorkKeys, Alabama now has a single assessment system that is fully aligned from grade school, through high school, to college and the workforce.

The ACT college readiness exam—which Howell called the “gold standard” for defining college readiness—is built around indicators showing whether a student is prepared for college-level work in English, math, reading, and science.

“If students meet those benchmarks, we believe they have a 50-percent probability of scoring a B or above in college,” Howell said, “and a 75-percent chance of scoring a C or above.”

ACT officials played a role in national discussions about President Obama’s College and Career Readiness initiative—and when the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School

You’re faced with a problem about ratio and proportion, and you get the correct answer. “You didn’t get it right with an out-of-the-blue guess, you got it right because you were prepared,” said Vice President of Marketing Phillip Thompson.

If you were to go back and map all of the building blocks for this understanding, you could trace these back to the math skills learned in the third grade. That’s essentially the same process ACT Aspire has followed in constructing a college and career readiness exam for elementary and middle school students, based on the widely accepted benchmarks from the ACT college entrance exam.

Alignment with the ACT creates a more ‘meaningful’ assessment

This alignment with the ACT exam, which is already given in most Alabama high schools, is what first attracted state officials to ACT Aspire.

Bice said he expects the results from the exam will be “more telling” than the results from previous state assessments, “because now they’re actually aligned with a whole suite of assessments that comes next in high school and college.”

Rather than sitting down with a parent and saying, “Your child has a scale score of X, which places him at stanine Y in math,” educators can say, “Based on your child’s score in fifth grade math, if we keep him on a current learning trajectory in math, we can predict a 32 in math on the ACT as an 11th grader,” Bice said.

He added, “That’s a conversation and a goal that the educator, the child, and the parent can share, because it’s something they can actually strive for that’s more meaningful to them.”

Alabama integrated the Common Core standards into its College and Career Readiness Standards but has been defending this move to critics of the Common Core ever since.

As other states were looking at the PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments as their measurements for college and career readiness, “We wanted to make sure we were advancing our transformation of public education as far outside that political arena as possible,” Bice said. The ACT Aspire exam seemed like a logical choice.

Alabama’s experience with ACT Aspire

Alabama piloted the ACT Aspire exam in 2013 and did a full-scale rollout to nearly 350,000 students in

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grades three through eight this past spring. Some school systems chose to administer the test online, while others gave the pencil-and-paper version.

"We kept that option, because we wanted to make sure students were being tested the way they were taught," Bice said. "We were very pleased we were able to do that with ACT Aspire."

Another benefit was the amount of time it took students to finish the exam. The old state assessments took multiple days to administer. But with ACT Aspire, "students were finished in two and a half hours," Bice said.

Suzanne Lacey, superintendent of

Alabama's Talladega County Schools, said this shorter completion time left more time for instruction. Aside from the normal challenges inherent in switching to a new format, Lacey said, the test rollout went well in her district.

"We anticipate the data ... to be very beneficial as we move forward with instruction," she said.

State leaders were expecting the preliminary results from the exam by the end of September.

"We've made a commitment to our teachers and our school-level folks that we won't use these results to evaluate teachers or rank schools," Bice said. "We will not use them for any purpose other than what assessments should be used for—and that's to inform instructional decisions."

State officials will use these test results to establish a new baseline for the growth of individual students over time, Bice said, "and we'll look at areas in need of improvement at the state level, at all of our districts, and at each school."

With the ACT Aspire exam joining the ACT and ACT WorkKeys, Alabama now has a single assessment system that is fully aligned from grade school, through high school, to college and the workforce.

"That's pretty powerful," Bice concluded. And it has led to support from businesses and colleges for the work the state's schools are doing to prepare students for college or a career, "because all our expectations are aligned." **eSN**

More details about the ACT Aspire exam

ACT Aspire tests students' understanding in English, math, reading, science, and writing. The assessment measures student growth from grades 3-8 and early high school in the context of college and career readiness. It includes several question types, such as constructed response, selected response, and technology-enhanced items for schools that administer the test online.

For example, each test contains reading passages that include both informational text and literary passages. The items cover different levels of complexity that are appropriate for a given age group.

A sample high school test item on the ACT Aspire website focuses on understanding a sequence of events as it's presented in a text. Students are shown an incomplete sequence chart that lists events referred to in the reading passage. They're asked to complete the chart by dragging the two missing events located below the chart to the appropriate empty boxes.

Traditional sequence-type questions often ask what happened first or last in the story. This technology-enhanced item assesses a deeper understanding of sequence by allowing for more variables, ACT Aspire says. It also lets students move events from box to box, so they can consider different sequences of events before submitting their answer.

A sample science item shows a question that is appropriate for grades eight through early high school. It involves an experiment to study the viscosity of various liquids. Students are given a chart showing the results for liquids such as water, kerosene, SAE 10 motor oil, and corn syrup. They're asked to place these liquids in order from lowest to highest viscosity at a certain temperature by dragging and dropping these liquids into the proper sequence, measuring their ability to understand and interpret the data from the chart.

For each student, ACT Aspire provides predicted score ranges for the next two years for each of the five subject areas, as well as composite score ranges. The system also provides longitudinal score reporting for each subject area from grade three through 10. Scores are plotted over time and viewed alongside grade-level ACT Readiness Benchmarks, indicating whether students are on target for college and career readiness.

Besides showing progress with respect to these benchmarks, ACT Aspire shows student growth percentiles that describe how a student performed relative to other students with the same prior-year score history. For classrooms, schools, districts, states, and other user-defined groups, aggregate growth statistics are available to describe how much growth occurred in each group. **eSN**



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