

PARCC or ACT/ASPIRE - The Future of High-Stakes Testing in Illinois: Executive Summary

(the full report is available at www.d214.org/research)

High-stakes testing truly is high-stakes. It requires many hours of student, teacher, and administrator time. It provides students with often highly stressful hours of testing and labels them with a score rating that can have life-long implications. The aggregate scores can label schools as desirable or undesirable, impact teacher and administrator careers, and ultimately be used to judge the educational systems of an entire state or even country. As we stand on the threshold of a new testing era, we have to get it right.

Illinois has committed to the PARCC consortium for its future assessments for school accountability. Illinois also has a long-standing relationship with ACT, which is preparing a suite of tests to compete with PARCC. There recently has been much debate about whether we should continue with our transition to PARCC or continue to use ACT test products. This summary outlines the issues behind our choices.

PARCC

The following are positive and negative aspects of using PARCC testing (boldfaced bullets represent the most important issues).

PARCC pluses:

- **The tests were designed from a multi-state consortium for the exact purpose for which they will be used.**
- **The tests fully embody Illinois Learning/Common Core Standards from which they were designed.**
- **They are focused on mathematics and language arts, the two most accurately testable areas.**
- **The longer subject-area tests demonstrated a genuine focus on the need for reliability and validity.**
- The performance-based items demonstrated depth and innovation.
- The pilot test showed that they were reasonably prepared from a technological standpoint.

PARCC minuses:

- **The tests seem much too long to be practical. They are much longer than current Illinois accountability tests, and therefore significantly reduce instructional time.**
- **The current timing of the administration window overlaps with spring break and, at the high school level, AP testing.**
- **Since it is not yet used for college admissions, students currently have much less motivation to perform well on the tests, and its universal administration will not enhance the access of underrepresented groups to higher education like universal ACT administration did.**
- **Its increased rigor may be excessive. Additionally, if the results are not carefully presented, higher standards can be misused to attack public education.**
- It costs more than our current tests or than its competitor, ACT.
- PARCC is a new test, so its ultimate reliability and validity are still unknown. The pilot for the PARCC performance tests demonstrated promise, but also demonstrated some validity issues.
- Most high school students will continue to need to take the ACT (3 hours and 25 minutes of additional testing time, excluding mandatory breaks) until/if the PARCC test can be used for college admissions.
- PARCC has experienced defections from several states, jeopardizing its future.

We have serious concerns with PARCC, but it has the potential to be much better than what we have now.

Switching to a new test will be painful in terms of time and recalculating our tracking of student and school improvement. But this is the price we will pay to improve assessment regardless of what new test we use. And except for the ACT test itself, all available tests will be new, and all (including the ACT) will be computerized.

Continuing with our current ACT testing company's products has been considered as a viable alternative to PARCC. The following bullet points summarize the issues with ACT (boldfaced bullets again represent the most important issues).

ACT/ASPIRE Pluses:

- **Past test products have been very useful for high school improvement efforts and 9th grade placement.**
- **Because it is used for college admissions, the ACT test is meaningful to our students.**
- **We already know and use the ACT test.**
- The high school-level College Readiness Standards have been useful for guiding the design of curriculum.

ACT Minuses:

- **The ACT and the currently used EXPLORE and PLAN need significant improvements. They have limited validity and reliability, particularly in terms of the inability of the ACT, PLAN, and EXPLORE science and reading tests to predict future classroom performance.**
- **The single ASPIRE test that is replacing both the PLAN and EXPLORE, while longer, probably will be too short to track student progress accurately at the high school level (as are the current EXPLORE and PLAN).**
- **Grade 3 through 8 ASPIRE tests currently remain a total unknown, and the high school ASPIRE is a partial unknown.**
- **ACT does not yet seem to be ready to deliver the ASPIRE test, particularly at the grade school levels.**
- **The alignment of ACT products to the Illinois Learning/Common Core Standards is limited.**
- **Newer products from ACT have been disappointing.**
- **ACT's corporate ethics have been questionable, with too much emphasis on marketing and on manufacturing a crisis of low rates of college readiness that prove to be highly inaccurate.**
- The ASPIRE test that replaces the EXPLORE and PLAN is much more expensive with little justification for such a large increase.
- In the past, ACT has not provided schools with the information to connect test items to standards and to curriculum.
- In the past, ACT has required Illinois to administer the never-scientifically-validated WorkKeys suite of tests.

ASPIRE does not appear to be sufficiently different in content from the EXPLORE and PLAN to fix similar issues with them at the high school level or to justify the cost increase. Given ACT's less than favorable track record with anything outside of their ACT test and its EXPLORE and PLAN permutations, ACT's proposed future products are unknowns that cannot be assumed to be valid, reliable, or useful. Finally, we should not continue to support a company that mislabels schools as failing to prepare students for college despite all evidence (even from reports by ACT themselves) showing very substantially higher college success levels. Given these caveats, ACT products currently are not a desirable option for the future of high-stakes testing in Illinois.

The future of Illinois testing is not necessarily a choice between just PARCC and ACT. The other multi-state consortium, Smarter Balanced, may be an option, though their lack of 9th and 10th grade tests could be a deal-breaker. SAT is showing promise with their recent revisions, but they currently are only a two-test high school option. So for now, the most apparently viable options are PARCC or ACT/ASPIRE.

Many schools would like to wait for another year, using the current tests until we know more about their potential replacements. This probably is not an option, other than the proposed use of the ACT for 11th grade and PARCC for the rest. But we will need 11th grade PARCC test data to move ahead with research on the potential use of the test for possible college admission, if we can get higher education buy-in.

We need to explore the potential for shortening PARCC, both through reducing the length of the test by at least a couple of hours (which may provide the added benefit of reducing the cost) and revisiting the impractical standard of allowing a full 50% extra time for performance tests for those wanting it. We need to better fit the test into the current school calendar so that it does not interfere with spring break or high school AP testing. If the PARCC test is designed to measure college readiness, and if research on an initial college freshman cohort validates this, then the higher education needs to commit to honoring it as sufficient for college entrance and placement. Please note that PARCC currently specifies that it is not to be used as a college admissions test.

Finally, we need a commitment to frame data in a way that accurately evaluates schools, teachers, and students. Public high schools have endured headlines broadcasting meaningless PSAT findings which labeled some of the best schools in the world as "failing." ACT annually broadcast similarly ridiculous findings of college readiness levels that were treated as fact. The media will continue to look for sensationalistic negative headlines. We need to be realistic of how far we can raise standards, and then we need to ensure that the data are presented in a way that promotes school improvement, not the destruction of public education.

While no one test or suite of tests can comprehensively measure students, teachers, or schools, they can provide vital information. We need better tests, and now is the time to implement them.