



CASE STUDY

Setting Students' Sights on College: Chicago Public Schools

Challenge

Part of the third-largest school district in the nation, 85 percent of Chicago's 430,000 public school students are poor, as defined by eligibility for participation in free or reduced-cost lunch programs. Many are members of minorities; many have limited proficiency in English. These young people, like students everywhere, are striving for a good education and a prosperous future. To make a successful transition to college—even to graduate from high school—many young people in the Chicago school system face hurdles unimaginable in the nearby suburbs. For example, most Chicago high schools have well over 2,000 students, but only three or four counselors in the entire school to meet their needs.

The Chicago Public School system (CPS) wants to increase the college readiness of the city's students. Its goal is to increase the numbers of students who take a rigorous curriculum and set their sights on getting into the most challenging college for which they are qualified. The CPS also wants to improve high school graduation rates and college attendance rates, and to provide a basis for curricular interventions to improve student performance.

Solution

The CPS instituted citywide administrations of EXPLORE® and PLAN® to help all Chicago public school students begin thinking and planning for higher education and to prepare them for statewide administration of the PSAT (Prarie State Achievement Examinations, which include the ACT®) beginning in spring 2002.

Why EPAS?

EXPLORE, PLAN, and the ACT—the three programs in ACT's Educational Planning and Assessment System® (EPAS)—provide an assessment system that measures student readiness along a continuum of college readiness benchmarks. EPAS allows teachers, counselors, and students themselves to track academic progress from eighth through twelfth grades on skills directly related and linked to college preparation. According to Susan Szurek, an English teacher at the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences, "The classroom teachers use the PLAN item analysis report from ACT to determine instructional focus. Administratively, the school uses test information from the EXPLORE and PLAN to determine where tutoring dollars will be spent. For ACT preparation, scores are reviewed to organize homogeneous groups that will target specific ACT College Readiness Standards. In general, the EPAS system is a most useful tool."

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*Susan Szurek
English Teacher
Chicago High School for
Agricultural Sciences*

In conjunction with assessing academic progress, EPAS helps students plan for their future by providing information on careers that match their interests and skills. Encouraging students to think about possible careers early on allows them to plan more effectively for the academic courses they will need to achieve their career goals. In the words of Cynthia Barron, who supervises high school principals and is charged with the responsibility of instructional improvement in the high schools for CPS, “My principals clearly use the EPAS system to determine growth patterns of students as they move from the EXPLORE to the PLAN and to the ACT examination as well as identifying curriculum gaps. We challenge ourselves to respond to this powerful data.”

The Illinois State Board of Education chose to include the ACT in the PSAE because it is a long-established, thoroughly tested examination that measures educational achievement in English, math, reading, and science, academic areas covered by the PSAE. The knowledge and skills measured by the ACT are closely aligned with Illinois’s Learning Standards and with success in college. The higher a student’s score on the ACT, the more likely that student is to be college ready, to achieve higher grades in college, and to persist to a college degree.

Results

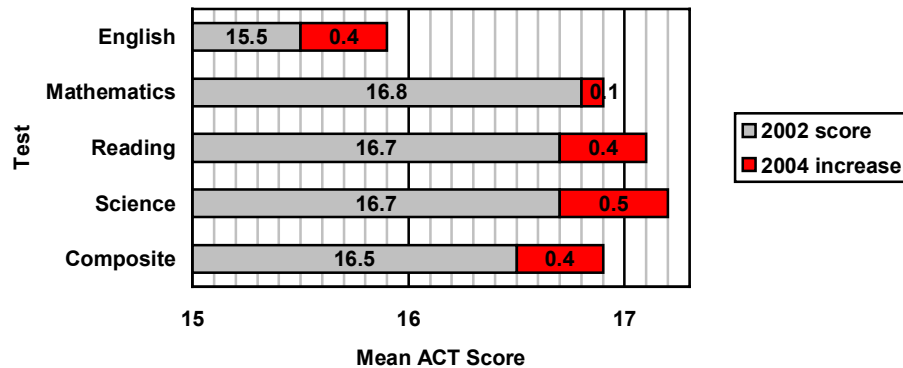
Although average citywide ACT scores followed the state trend and dipped upon the first administration of the PSAE in spring 2002 due to the increase in the number of test takers at all achievement levels, students have been making steady progress ever since—even as the numbers of students tested has continued to rise.

Since 2002, the first year in which all Chicago public high school students took the ACT:

- **The number of Chicago students taking the ACT has continued to grow each year, representing opportunity for more students.**
 - Prior to 2002, about 5,000 students were participating in the ACT. Since then the number of students taking the ACT has increased steadily, from 15,257 in 2002 (more than three times the 2001 number) to 16,861 in 2004, an increase of more than 10 percent.

- **Student performance is improving.**
 - Chicago schools increased scores on the PSAE (of which the ACT is a part) in every subject in 2004 over 2003. Fifty-seven of the 78 city high schools administering the PSAE improved their average scores. At seven of these schools, the PSAE passing rate rose by at least 10 percentage points over 2003.
 - Since 2002, Chicago students have increased their ACT scores in all subject areas, with the most dramatic increase occurring in the Science Test. ACT Composite scores increased from 16.5 to 16.9; English Test scores increased from 15.5 to 15.9; Mathematics Test scores increased from 16.8 to 16.9; Reading Test scores increased from 16.7 to 17.1; and Science Test scores increased from 16.7 to 17.2, as shown below.

Increases in Average ACT Scores for Chicago Public Schools (2002-2004)



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*Cynthia Barron
Area Instruction Officer
Chicago Public Schools
High School Area 24*

- The test score gains made by Chicago students between 2002 and 2004 in all subject areas and in the ACT Composite score were anywhere from one and one-third times greater (English) to two and a half times greater (Science) than those made statewide in Illinois during the same period. Chicago students’ gains in average Reading and Composite scores were double those of students statewide, while their 0.1-point increase in Mathematics score compares favorably to that of Illinois students, who made no progress in Mathematics during the same period.
- In 2004, ACT Composite scores increased for all racial/ethnic groups except Puerto Rican students, whose mean remained stable. Native Americans made the most dramatic increase, with an average score increase of 1.3 points between 2002 and 2004.
- Between 2002 and 2004, Chicago students increased their college readiness by 1 percent in mathematics and 2 percent in English, compared to no change in readiness for large urban school districts nationally.

■ **Most students are planning to enter some form of postsecondary education.**

- The percentage of students requesting assistance with educational or occupational plans increased 2 percent between 2002 and 2004, showing increased awareness and valuing of post–high school planning.
- In 2004, 59 percent of Chicago students indicated a desire to attend some form of postsecondary education. Of these, 49 percent said they aspire to a bachelor’s degree or higher, with the majority aspiring to a graduate or professional-level degree.

■ **More students are taking the right number of core courses in 2004 compared to 2002.**

- 17 percent more students took one or more higher-level math courses beyond Algebra I, Algebra II, and Geometry.
- 6 percent more students took four years of English and Speech.
- 2 percent more students took at least Biology, Chemistry, and Physics.