



**CASE STUDY**

## **Measuring Illinois Students' Progress toward State Learning Standards**

### **Challenge**

The federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1994 required states to (1) adopt challenging content and student performance standards and (2) demonstrate that they have adopted a set of high-quality, yearly student assessments. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), in response to this law, adopted the Illinois Learning Standards in 1997. These standards are a set of statements that define the specific knowledge and skills that every public school student should learn in school.

The challenge ISBE faced was coming up with a set of high quality assessments that would accurately measure students' progress in meeting the learning standards it had set.

### **Solution**

To comply with the requirement for a high-quality, yearly student assessment at the high school level, the Illinois General Assembly established the Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE) in July 1999. The exam is taken by all public school 11th graders each spring. The first administration of PSAE was in the spring of 2001.

Included within the PSAE is the ACT®, a college admission and placement exam. Also included are two ACT WorkKeys® tests (Reading for Information and Applied Mathematics) and a state-developed assessment in science.

### **Why the ACT?**

The ISBE chose to include the ACT in the PSAE because it is a long-established, thoroughly tested exam that measures educational achievement in English, math, reading, and science, four of the academic areas covered by the PSAE. The knowledge and skills measured by the ACT are closely aligned with the Illinois Learning Standards.

An added benefit: Including the ACT in the PSAE helps ensure that all students are prepared to consider going to college after high school. Illinois students can use the ACT scores they receive from the PSAE to apply to almost any college or university in the United States, even if they had not previously considered continuing their education after high school. Including the WorkKeys tests addresses advances in technology and information that have changed the workplace, which now requires more advanced skills and knowledge from workers than ever before.

## Results

### ■ Many more Illinois students are taking the ACT.

- The number of Illinois graduating seniors taking the ACT was 51 percent higher in 2003 than in 2001, before the PSAE was introduced.
- The most dramatic increases in test takers can be seen among:
  - Males (+61%)
  - Minority graduates (+50%)
  - Graduates from families earning \$30,000 per year or less (+45%)

### ■ College enrollment is up.

- The number of in-state, ACT-tested fall freshmen enrolled in Illinois colleges in 2002 (the first graduating class affected by PSAE testing) was up by 24 percent compared to the previous year.
- The number of these college freshmen from families earning \$30,000 per year or less was up by 8 percent compared to 2001.

### ■ Access to college has expanded.

- Included in the increased college enrollments in 2002 were 15 percent of the ACT-tested students who said they did not intend to go to college when they took the PSAE as high school juniors.
- The number of in-state, ACT-tested minorities enrolled in Illinois colleges increased by 19 percent in 2002 over 2001.
- The number of ACT-tested Illinois graduates who aspire to further their education after high school increased by 23 percent in 2003 compared to 2001.

### ■ College readiness has increased.

- The number of Illinois high school graduates earning an ACT Composite score of 18 (the low end of the range for admission to colleges with liberal admission policies) or higher was 27 percent higher in 2003 than in 2001.
- Significantly more Illinois graduates were ready for college algebra (+21%) and English composition (+29%) in 2003 than in 2001, based on their ACT scores.
- Illinois' state average ACT Composite score rose from 20.1 in 2002 to 20.2 in 2003, despite an increase in the number of students tested.