

**Testimony before the
Select Committee on Public School Accountability
March 27, 2008**

**RIGOR AT RISK: REAFFIRMING QUALITY IN THE HIGH SCHOOL CORE
CURRICULUM**

Thank you Senator Shapiro, Representative Eissler and members of the Committee for your invitation to speak with you today. My name is Jon Erickson and I am the Vice President of Educational Services for ACT. I am pleased to have the opportunity to be here today to share with you ACT's research and advice as Texas begins to develop end-of-course assessments focused on college and postsecondary readiness.

ACT, a private not-for-profit organization, is a nationally respected leader focused on the issues of college and work readiness and success based upon our extensive research over the past 50 years. Our mission, simply stated, is to help people achieve education and workplace success. We are recognized as a leader in test development, test administration, reporting, and educational research and we have more than 1,200 dedicated and highly qualified employees.

While ACT is best known for the ACT test, used for college admission and placement and accepted and used at virtually every college and university in Texas and across the nation, we also develop and administer the nation's leading work readiness system (WorkKeys). In addition we develop and administer the only vertically articulated and curriculum-based College Readiness System in the nation, which is composed of the EXPLORE program (at 8th and 9th grade), the PLAN program at 10th grade, and the ACT at 11th or 12th grade. And now we are adding an instructional improvement component to this College Readiness System, QualityCore, which includes among other things end-of-course assessments.

I would like to focus my brief comments today on 3 areas:

- What led us to design and develop end-of-course assessments
- What our research tells us
- And what our recommendations are to Texas

First, what led ACT to end-of-course testing? Beginning with the release of the national report “A Nation at Risk” in 1983, ACT has been a leader in promoting the importance and value of a core curriculum in high school. Indeed, by promoting core course requirements we all have been essentially promising students and their parents that simply taking a set core courses would make them ready for college. Our data suggests that this is hardly the case. For instance, in 2007 only 1 in 4 ACT tested high school graduates who took the recommended core were in fact ready to go into credit bearing entry level college freshmen math, English, science and reading-based social science courses that are key to student success.

Even more disturbing to us was the fact that in order to significantly increase students college readiness it was necessary for students to take even more higher level courses beyond core, and even then the percentage determined college ready was far from sufficient, in some cases, as in science, never exceeding 50% of our nation’s graduates ready for college-level courses. And this has all occurred while at the same time we are seeing student’s high school grades continually increase. This led us to question the rigor of many high school courses and to a conclusion that at many schools the courses are not based on college/career ready standards and the content is frequently watered down.

We then asked the question “What can be done to improve our high school core courses?” Here’s what our research tells us. In conjunction with The Education Trust, we identified high schools across the nation (and in Texas) that had large proportions of their students college ready, a significant accomplishment made even more remarkable by the fact that we exclusively focused on schools serving predominantly Title I funded, underrepresented students. These were essentially “break the mold schools” because they were producing college-ready students in proportions that exceeded what we see nationally. After years of in-depth, on-site review of these schools, we were able to determine several factors that were critical, foremost among them being a common set of essential course standards that were empirically tied to college readiness.

A necessary prerequisite to establishing course standards, as well as state college readiness standards, is to build standards based upon objective factual data as compared to the proliferation of subjective standards that exist today based solely upon opinion. From this research we identified 15 key courses and the ESSENTIAL COURSE level standards that are directly tied to college readiness. It is not surprising to any of us how most state standards have been identified: by committees of both educators and businesspeople who identify what they “think” is

important for students to know. But the key issue is, even though this is a politically palatable approach, we can't be certain that if students learn these skills that they will be the right skills for college success

A second necessary prerequisite to establishing course standards is to validate their impact, both at the college level and in other schools. We validated our course standards research with an additional 300 high performing schools across the nation (including Texas). This research undergirds the end-of-course tests that are part of ACT's new instructional improvement program, QualityCore. We are also in the process of concluding a number of research studies at the college level to further validate that these standards and assessments actually result in student readiness and success in credit-bearing college courses.

The resulting course standards and scores are also directly related to ACT's national College Readiness Standards and College Readiness Benchmarks, as well as to our college readiness measures (including the ACT), thus enabling a school, district or state to focus ongoing instruction and track students' acquisition of important course specific college readiness knowledge and skills. Schools can identify students early who may be in need of assistance, target instruction and make curricular revisions that are informed by specific examples of knowledge and skills, teaching strategies, and sample lessons.

So, what do we recommend Texas consider as you begin the development of end-of-course assessments and along with the alignment of curriculum with college readiness standards? Based upon our research, we offer the following five recommendations:

1. **High school courses should be based on course standards that are empirically tied to college readiness standards and performance.** These standards should not be solely based on subjective opinions of various experts and stakeholders but rather on rigorous content that can be taught and learned as demonstrated in high performing schools. Otherwise the standards amount to nothing more than another kiss and a prayer for students.
2. **Course achievement as measured by the end of course assessment must be tied to the actual college performance of students.** We cannot assume that if schools just administer an end- of-course examination then what is measured in that examination relates to college readiness. There must be validity research that documents the relationship between

students' performance on the end-of-course examination and their readiness to take and succeed in college entry, credit bearing courses. In other words, performance on the examination must be validated on actual success in college in order for the end-of-course examinations to be helpful to students and teachers.

3. **The college-ready scores and levels should relate to measures and decisions that are relevant to all stakeholders.** The scores and reports from the assessments should relate to college admission scores, college course placement scores, and scores tied to scholarship awards. Tying the end-of-course assessments to already commonly accepted and understood measures, such as the ACT, will make the implementation and acceptance of the system easier, faster, and oftentimes less expensive for both schools and the state.
4. **End-of-course examinations must be supported by professional development of teachers.** Our research tells us that teachers are going to need support in learning how to teach to college-ready standards. It will take more than end-of-course assessments to effectively increase college readiness. Simply giving a test will not make students college ready. We must improve and inform instruction in order improve student achievement. It will require extensive professional development of teachers and the provision of related supporting resources that are aligned with the curriculum and with the end-of-course tests in order to help teachers to teach to college readiness standards. Assessment that helps guide quality instruction is critical.
5. **The end-of-course tests should be designed so that increases in college readiness of students can be measured on a course-by-course basis.** That is, when students finish a course, we ought to be able to evaluate how much value that course added to students' college readiness. This can greatly aid in helping schools and/or the state to gauge the relative impact (or value-add) of their courses on students progress towards college readiness. This will help target resources, improvement efforts, and effective practices. It's also a way to assure course quality across classrooms and schools – that all students are receiving courses of high quality that prepare them for college and career.

In conclusion, our research and experience strongly suggests that the rigor of our high school courses is at risk. But our research also demonstrates that an aligned

college readiness system that is transparent and targeted on essential college readiness skills can be done and is being done in schools today. Most teachers want to improve the quality of their courses and they want to increase students' readiness for college. The challenge is focusing on the RIGHT, ESSENTIAL course standards and providing supports so that all schools, teachers, and students have equal access and opportunities to high-quality courses in high school.

We stand ready to assist Texas—in test development, in transition planning, in teacher training, in technical research, in standard setting, or in consulting. Whatever direction Texas selects, I want to reaffirm ACT's commitment to continue our long history of serving and partnering with Texas schools, colleges and agencies to address the needs of educators and students in the state. We are committed to improving student achievement, options, and success after high school.

Thank you.

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