



CASE STUDY

Measuring Colorado Students' Progress toward State Learning Standards

Challenge

Colorado's constitution directs the General Assembly to establish and maintain a thorough and uniform system of free public schools throughout the state. However, the wide variety of different practices and curricula among various school districts and schools across the state made it increasingly difficult to measure whether or not the statewide system of schools was, in fact, thorough and uniform. It was also difficult for parents to determine whether or not the public schools in which their children were enrolled were providing quality instruction in an atmosphere conducive to learning.

In addition, minority and lower-income high school graduates in Colorado were attending college at rates substantially lower than their Caucasian and higher-income peers. And, among those students who did go to college, many were forced to take remedial courses simply to get their skills up to speed with entry-level academic demands.

Solution

Colorado Senate Bill 186, signed into law in April 2000 by Governor Bill Owens, established an accountability system for the state wherein schools could be graded on their quality and success. This system, built around challenging academic standards, includes various grade-level assessments, collectively called the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP), designed to measure student achievement and progress toward these new learning standards.

The final stage of CSAP was to be an 11th grade achievement-based assessment that would give the state an indication of how well schools did in educating students at the K-12 level. The state chose the ACT® to serve that role and began administering the exam to all public school 11th graders in April 2001.

Why the ACT?

With the support of Governor Owens, Colorado selected the ACT as its 11th grade test because it is a long-established, thoroughly researched exam that measures educational achievement. The knowledge and skills tested on the ACT are closely aligned with Colorado's challenging state learning standards.

The ACT also was chosen because the state wanted to motivate students to do their very best on the 11th-grade test. Scores on the ACT have an impact on college admissions decisions and, as such, students have much more at stake than simply helping their schools earn high grades on the state report card—the outcome affects them directly.

Finally, the ACT was selected because the state wished to level the playing field in terms of college access. Far too few minority and lower-income students were making the transition from high school to college. Providing all students with ACT scores would, it was hoped, open doors of opportunity and encouragement for many students who might never have considered going to college.

Results

■ Many more Colorado students are taking the ACT.

- The number of graduating seniors taking the ACT increased by 69 percent in 2003 compared to 2001.
- The most dramatic increases in test takers can be seen among:
 - Minority graduates (+94%)
 - Males (+85%)
 - Graduates from families earning \$30,000 per year or less (+70%)

■ College enrollment is up.

- The number of in-state, ACT-tested fall freshmen enrolled in Colorado colleges in 2002—the first enrolling class affected by statewide ACT testing—increased by 23 percent compared to 2001.

■ Access to college has expanded.

- Included in the increased college enrollments in 2002 were 12 percent of the ACT-tested students who said they did not intend to go to college when they took the ACT as high school juniors.
- The number of in-state, ACT-tested minorities enrolled in Colorado colleges increased by 18 percent in 2002 over 2001.
- The number of ACT-tested Colorado graduates who aspire to further their education after high school increased by 34 percent in 2003 compared to 2001.

■ College readiness has increased.

- The number of Colorado 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 42 percent higher in 2003 than in 2001.
- Significantly more Colorado graduates were ready for college algebra (+32%) and English composition (+42%) in 2003 than in 2001, based on their ACT scores.