

Early College Planning Pays Big Dividends: Louisiana

Challenge

Forty-four percent of all Louisiana high school students drop out; the dropout rate is twice as high for African American students as for Caucasian students. These figures add to an already dwindling number of high-school-age students in the state. In the face of this declining high school population, which translates into declining enrollment at the state's postsecondary institutions, the state Board of Regents has committed itself to addressing economic development on both the education and workforce fronts. Through its *Master Plan for Public Postsecondary Education*, Louisiana is taking a variety of steps to increase public awareness of the importance of academic preparation to the future quality of life of Louisiana's citizens.

According to its Commissioner of Higher Education, Joseph Savoie, Louisiana has a "vested interest in the preparation and progress of all students." One of the components of the *Master Plan* is an effort to increase the academic standards required for college admission. The Board recognized that timely assessment and intervention is a necessary component in ensuring that more of Louisiana's students are meeting the criteria necessary for college success. The state was looking for an assessment program that would reflect and support the core values of the *Master Plan* by improving the preparation of Louisiana's students.

Solution

In 2001, the Louisiana Board of Regents began offering ACT's EXPLORE[®] and PLAN[®] as part of its statewide effort to raise academic standards for college admission. At first, the Board of Regents administered the tests free of charge to every school that volunteered to participate in the program. The program has since expanded to include every public high school and middle school in the state.

Why EPAS?

ACT's Educational Planning and Assessment System (EPAS[™]), composed of EXPLORE, PLAN, and the ACT, provides an assessment system that measures student readiness along a continuum of college readiness benchmarks. EPAS allows teachers, counselors, and students to track academic progress from eighth through twelfth grades on skills directly related and linked to college preparation.

The ACT is used by all Louisiana institutions of higher education in admission, placement, and scholarship decisions. The knowledge and skills measured by the ACT are closely aligned 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

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grades in college, and to persist to a college degree. EXPLORE and PLAN are early measures of college readiness in the eighth and tenth grades, respectively, and provide scores that are reported on the same score scale as the ACT.

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.

EPAS also provides data to steer the school reform efforts that are under way in Louisiana. Using EPAS, the state is making the reforms relevant to students and workers, and is collecting the data it needs in order to be accountable.

Results

■ Student participation in EPAS has increased.

- Since 2001, the number of students taking EXPLORE in Louisiana has increased fourfold, the number of students taking PLAN has more than doubled, and the percentage of Louisiana high school graduates participating in the ACT has increased by 7 percent. These increases signify that more students are being exposed to greater educational opportunities both during high school and afterward.

■ Student performance is improving.

- In 2004, Louisiana students scored an all-time record high on the ACT and experienced the largest test score gain of any state in the nation on the test. In 2004, the average ACT Composite score increased after remaining stable for the previous five years. This increase was double that of the average ACT Composite score increase nationally.
- Nearly all racial and ethnic groups in the state improved their average ACT Composite scores by up to one-half point over 2003.
- Students who take both EXPLORE and PLAN fare better than students who take only PLAN. Louisiana tenth graders who took EXPLORE in 2001 fared significantly better on PLAN in English and mathematics in 2004 than did their state counterparts who took only PLAN. In addition, these students met or exceeded the national average PLAN scores for English and mathematics.
- In 2004, the increase over 2003 in the percentage of Louisiana students who took PLAN and achieved scores equivalent to a 20 or higher on the ACT surpassed the comparable increase nationally. This is especially noteworthy because in 2003 the Louisiana percentage was already greater than the national percentage.
- Lower-income students in Louisiana are making test score gains equivalent to or better than those of higher-income students. In 2004, Louisiana high school graduates from families with annual incomes of less than \$24,000 improved their average ACT Composite score,

matching or exceeding that of Louisiana high school graduates from families with annual incomes between \$80,000 and \$100,000.

- In all subject areas, Louisiana students are making test score gains equivalent to or better than those seen nationally. In 2004, Louisiana students improved their average scores in every ACT subject test over 2003, marking unprecedented progress. Students gained the most ground on the Mathematics Test, improving three-tenths of a point—three times the growth seen nationally. Louisiana students’ average English Test score increase outpaced the national English Test increase two to one. Increases in Reading and Science kept pace with the national increases in these subject areas.

■ **College readiness has increased.**

- The percentage of Louisiana high school graduates demonstrating readiness for their first credit-bearing college algebra course has increased 4 percentage points since 2001, from 24 to 28 percent. During the same period, the percentage of Louisiana students demonstrating readiness for their first credit-bearing courses in English composition and biology remained steady, at 64 percent and 18 percent, respectively.

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

- In 2004, the number of Louisiana high school graduates who reported aspiring to a bachelor’s degree or higher grew to 81 percent.