Interpreting One-Year Changes in College Readiness

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From one year to the next, educators and school administrators and officials often give consideration to changes in the percentage of their students who are ready for college. The magnitude of this change, however, can be difficult to interpret due to a variety of factors. One such factor is the definition of college readiness.

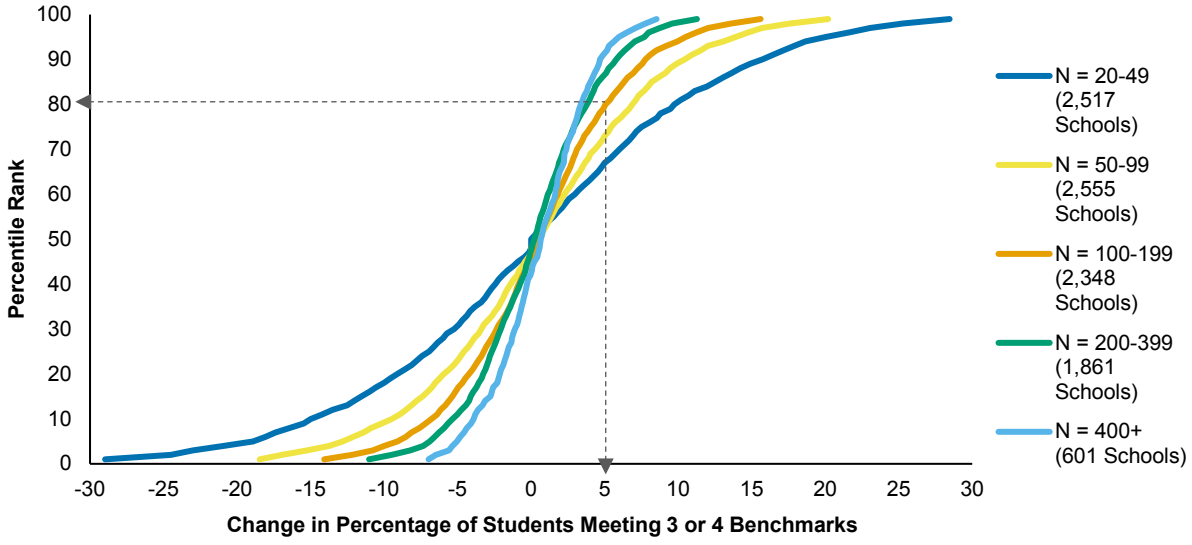
In this instance, college readiness is defined as meeting at least three of the ACT® English, Math, Reading, and Science College Readiness Benchmarks. Depending on their intended field of study, students who meet at least three Benchmarks can have the skills needed to succeed in college.

Another key factor is the number of students being tested. The larger the number of tested students, the smaller the random sampling error, and the more likely a change in the college readiness percentage can be attributed to events such as a change in school curriculum.

School-level changes in college readiness percentages used for the chart below were based upon results from 2016 and 2017 ACT-tested graduating classes. The chart is designed to illustrate changes in college readiness (students meeting three or four Benchmarks) while taking the number of tested students into account. To read the chart:

1. **Find the curve describing schools with the same number of ACT-tested graduates as a school of interest. Because school-level outcomes for those with fewer than 20 students typically exhibit higher random error levels, outcomes for such schools should be compared to the accompanying graph's line representing counts from 20 to 49.**
2. **Locate the point on the horizontal axis that represents that school's change in college readiness percentage.**
3. **Trace a vertical line from that point until it intersects the curve corresponding to the number of tested students in that school.**
4. **Trace a horizontal line from that intersection to the vertical axis and determine the axis value at that point.**

Figure 1. One Year Changes in College Readiness Percentile Ranks by Number of Students Tested



The vertical axis value represents the percentage of schools that had a change in college readiness less than or equal to that attained by the school of interest's students (i.e., the school's relative rank in college readiness change among others with similar numbers of ACT-tested graduates).

As an example, suppose a school had 135 ACT-tested graduates and achieved a college readiness increase of 5% from the previous year. From the chart, it can be seen that this increase has a percentile rank of about 80. This means that the school's percentage gain was greater than or equal to that seen by 80% of the 2,348 schools in its size grouping.

When evaluating college readiness, it is important to remember that large changes in the number (or percentage) of students tested in a school from one year to the next may result in pronounced changes in percent meeting three or four ACT Benchmarks due to changes in the test-taking population. This is often seen when a state or district adopts census testing.

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