



STATEMENT OF

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BEFORE THE HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR, AND PENSIONS COMMITTEE

UNITED STATES SENATE

ON

ESEA REAUTHORIZATION: STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENTS

APRIL 28, 2010

About ACT

Good afternoon, Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi, and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about ACT's research on college and career readiness and its importance to the future of our nation's students.

ACT, Inc. is an independent, not-for-profit organization that provides assessment, research, information, and program management services in education and workforce development. We are perhaps best known for the ACT test, the widely used college admission examination, but our scope and range go far beyond that one exam. Each year, we serve millions of individuals in middle schools, high schools, colleges, professional associations, businesses, and government agencies both nationally and internationally. Although designed to meet a wide array of needs, all ACT programs and services have one guiding purpose: helping people achieve education and workplace success.

For more than 50 years, ACT has collected and reported data on students' academic readiness for college by following millions of students into all types of postsecondary education to evaluate their success through college completion. ACT is the only organization with decades of data showing exactly what happens to high school graduates once they get to college or workforce training, based on how well they were prepared in middle school and high school.

While the attention paid to common college and career readiness standards and assessments is relatively recent, ACT has been implementing common standards and common assessments for well over 20 years. We have developed research-based standards that are linked to actual student success at the postsecondary level. As a result, the standards we have developed are generally fewer in number and more rigorous than what is typically found in many states' standards. In this model, our assessment data are comparable and transportable across state lines and have strong links to the postsecondary sector. As of the 2009-10 school year, our College and Career Readiness System of vertically aligned assessments for 8th, 10th, and 11th or 12th grade students has been adopted statewide in 15 states and used at the district and school levels in all 50 states.

In this regard, our philosophy and approach are unique. Our assessments are grounded in research that tells us what knowledge and skills are *essential* in order for students to be ready for college and career. In my testimony I will share what we have learned and offer suggestions for reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

Defining College and Career Readiness

We are deeply encouraged by the national momentum to elevate the importance of college and career readiness within the policies and programs authorized under ESEA. While recognizing that the role of the federal government in education is limited, we do believe that ESEA can promote equity and excellence in communities nationwide through a unified goal of ensuring that every student leaves high school ready for college and career.

A first step toward realizing this goal is to come to agreement on what constitutes “college and career readiness.” While there are many definitions of college and career readiness, the approach established through ACT research comes from empirical data.

ACT defines *college* readiness as acquisition of the knowledge and skills a student needs to enroll and succeed in credit-bearing, first-year courses at a postsecondary institution, such as a two- or four-year college, trade school, or technical school. Simply stated, readiness for college means not needing to take remedial courses in postsecondary education or training programs.

Unfortunately, there are far too many in this country who believe that the level of achievement needed for high school graduates who want to enter workforce training programs is far less than that needed for those students who plan to enter some form of postsecondary education. ACT research shows that *career* readiness requires the same level of foundational knowledge and skills in mathematics and reading that college readiness does. According to our research, the majority of the jobs that require at least a high school diploma, pay a living wage for a family of four, are projected to increase in number in the 21st century, and provide opportunities for career advancement require a level of knowledge and skills comparable to those expected of the first-year college student. So the level of knowledge and skills students need when they graduate from high school is the same whether they plan to enter postsecondary education or a workforce training program for jobs that offer salaries above the poverty line.

What we have learned through our research is the critical importance that college and career readiness plays in college success. Compared to high school graduates who are not college and career ready, those who are ready to enter credit-bearing college courses are more likely to enroll in college, stay in college, earn good grades, and persist to a college degree. And in our latest research study soon to be released, we found that gaps in college success among racial/ethnic groups and by family income narrow significantly among students who are ready for college and career.

There is still much work to be done to ensure that all students graduate high school with this level of readiness. Of the 1.5 million high school graduates who took the ACT during academic year 2008–2009, 33 percent were not ready for college-level English, 47 percent were not ready for college social science, 58 percent were not ready for College Algebra, and 72 percent were not ready for college Biology. Overall, only 23 percent were ready to enter college-level courses without remediation in any of the four subject areas.

The remainder of my testimony will focus on the two issues at hand today: standards and assessments.

But allow me to first point out that the natural progression in building a cohesive, aligned educational system is not directly from standards to assessments, but rather from standards, to interpreting those standards into language that teachers and leaders can understand, to

providing educators professional development on how to effectively teach the standards, to assessments that measure student progress linked to the standards, all followed by data monitoring and reporting to evaluate student progress and guide instruction. Therefore, I caution us to not make the assumption that standards and assessments—alone—are sufficient in and of themselves in ensuring college and career readiness for all students.

Implementing the Common Core State Standards

ACT has played a major role in the state-led Common Core State Standards Initiative, which seeks to articulate “fewer, clearer, and higher” K-12 education standards for voluntary adoption by states. The definition of college and career readiness within the Common Core State Standards Initiative is modeled on the approach pioneered by ACT. Endowed with extraordinary leadership from our nation’s governors and education chiefs, we believe that the Common Core initiative can be a catalyst for realizing the goal of preparing all students for college and career. I would like to address briefly some of the opportunities presented by this initiative.

In our view, the Common Core standards are of high quality, are easy to understand, and provide educators at the local level with the necessary flexibility to tailor instruction, curriculum, and professional development based on their own unique needs and contexts. The widespread enthusiasm for the draft common standards is a testament to the robust and open process that the initiative leaders established, and the hard work of many organizations and individuals from all over the nation in developing, critiquing, and improving these standards.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the Common Core State Standards Initiative is its insistence that evidence lead the way, rather than relying on subjective opinions about what students should be able to know and do when they leave high school. Not only did the initiative draw on ACT’s longitudinal research on what knowledge and skills students need to succeed in postsecondary education and workforce training, but it sought additional evidence such as research from high-performing countries, standards from high-performing states, academic research on learning progressions, and other resources to support the inclusion of each and every standard within the Common Core framework.

But merely developing college and career readiness standards is not sufficient in and of itself. Along with development of standards comes the important obligation to validate and strengthen those standards periodically in an ongoing process. The linkage between college and career readiness and success in postsecondary education and training, which has been a hallmark of ACT research, must now become a national priority. States have an obligation to ensure, through empirical validation—such as valuable feedback from postsecondary and workforce institutions to high schools about how well prepared their graduates were for college and career—that the level of readiness to which they are educating their students is continually being documented as sufficient preparation. ACT will be working with states to help establish such a validation process.

Further, our support of the Common Core initiative is predicated on the belief that this state-led movement provides a remarkable opportunity to better align and improve the essential foundations of our nation’s education system around this ambitious goal. We envision a future in which states, districts, and schools have fully aligned and integrated the core elements of their education infrastructure, including:

- expectations of what students need to learn and achieve through college and career readiness standards,
- instructional frameworks that broadly guide high-quality teaching and learning,
- rich and engaging classroom curricula and content,
- assessments aligned to college and career readiness standards and to what is taught in the classroom,
- systematic use of student data to improve teaching and learning,
- longitudinal data systems that enable the ongoing monitoring of student progress, allowing educators to identify students who are falling behind and accelerate them toward college and career readiness, and
- cohesive professional development programs for teachers and school leaders.

This opportunity to better align these elements—particularly in areas where there is a significant disconnect—would represent a monumental step toward meeting our national goal of ensuring educational equity and excellence for all students.

While ACT advocates for the better alignment of standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment, we also fully realize that a one-size-fits-all model is unlikely to be successful given the remarkable diversity of our nation’s 15,000 school districts. Ultimately, the success of this initiative will rest with the educators and community members at the state and district levels who will be responsible for incorporating the standards into daily practice, making decisions about instruction and curriculum, and guiding each and every student toward college and career readiness.

Obviously, for many states and districts the transition to incorporating college and career readiness standards into daily practice will not happen overnight. We should recognize that many districts across the country will require additional capacity—both financial and human—to manage the transition to fewer, clearer, and higher standards.

For school, district, and state education leaders implementing the Common Core State Standards, there are several ways ESEA can provide critical assistance:

- promote college and career readiness as a fundamental national goal and priority for *all* students;
- support states, districts, and schools in developing monitoring systems that tell educators whether students are on target for college and career readiness at each grade level so that they can intervene when students fall behind academically; and
- incentivize the implementation of college and career readiness standards by working with states to develop an accountability system that will meet their evolving demands and allow for nuanced—not one-size-fits-all—evaluations of student achievement.

Improving State Assessment Systems

The timing for the development of common standards and the reauthorization of ESEA has spurred a productive national dialogue on how we can improve the purposes, design, and use of assessments in K-12 education. ACT has used this opportunity to consult with state and local stakeholders to discuss what our own next-generation system should look like so that we can continue to be responsive to their current and future needs. I want to share some of what we have been learning from a wide variety of ACT stakeholders.

We know that no single assessment instrument is perfectly suited for meeting all of the purposes that teachers, education leaders, and policymakers have for assessment. But when various assessment types are used in combination, they can provide a more comprehensive portrait of student and school progress than we have had in the past. We believe that it is possible to strike the appropriate balances among assessment types to meet the multiple and varied needs of educators and policymakers while adhering to the highest professional standards.

We envision states moving toward more cohesive systems, comprised of multiple assessment measures and assessment types such as formative, interim, end-of-course, summative, and project-based assessments. While the widespread adoption of college and career readiness standards will help facilitate stronger alignment among the components of the assessment system, the assessments should also be designed from the start to be compatible with one another. Within such a system, each assessment would work with the others to reveal a richer picture of student achievement and growth, rather than operate in isolation. Such assessments enable us to identify students who are on target, nearly on target, or off target for college and career readiness, allowing educators to intervene with students who are falling behind.

The new generation of assessments should represent our highest aspirations while remaining sensitive to the pragmatic challenges faced by educators at the local and state levels: financial and human resources, access to necessary technology for computer-based testing, and educational practice. While the national dialogue on future assessment is focused on the promise of innovation, we recognize that even minor decisions about assessment design can have a significant impact on

cost, complexity of administration, and scoring and reporting. In short, we need to strike an appropriate balance between innovation and sustainability.

What we have learned from state, district, and school leaders is informing ACT's development process as we move toward a next-generation assessment system. I hope that some of these lessons will be helpful to the Committee in the reauthorization of ESEA:

1. College and career readiness is a process, not a single point in time. Growth and progress toward readiness must be monitored over a student's educational experience, starting in elementary school and through high school, so that timely instructional decisions and interventions can be made.
2. Assessments need to be part of a system that is aligned, linked, and longitudinal in nature if it is to be an effective tool for students, teachers, administrators, and parents in monitoring student progress. We must be exceptionally clear in defining the purposes, uses, and limits of effective assessment.
3. State assessment systems should include not only measures of academic achievement and growth, but also measures of those academic behaviors that influence readiness and educational and career planning.
4. The unique needs of English Language Learners and students with disabilities should be incorporated from the start of the assessment design process and with the deep consultation of stakeholders and experts.
5. Assessment formats should be varied according to the type of achievement that needs to be measured. These multiple measures can be used to offer more comprehensive evaluations of student achievement, from multiple-choice and constructed-response assessments to project-based learning.
6. Assessment should be offered through multiple platforms. While computer-based testing is highly applicable to formative assessments that can be conducted on an on-demand basis, paper-and-pencil testing may be a reality for states and districts with less technological capacity. Until computer access for such large groups of students is more available in schools, we need to use both platforms flexibly and wisely.
7. Ongoing, real-time, interactive reporting and access to data by multiple stakeholders—especially teachers—is essential if stakeholders are to get the most out of assessment results.

Given our experience at implementing high-quality assessments tied to college and career readiness standards, ACT offers the following recommendations for the state assessment component of ESEA reauthorization:

- continue to improve summative state assessments for the purposes of student monitoring and accountability measured against the standards;
- authorize additional resources for states implementing college and career readiness standards to develop coherent systems of assessment that include innovative measures such as end-of-course, project-based, and formative assessments; and
- increase the capability of states, districts, and schools to more effectively use assessment data to monitor student progress, intervene when students are falling behind, and differentiate instruction to advance college and career readiness for *all* students.

Taken together, our nation's efforts to strengthen standards and assessments will be a critically important accomplishment, but are merely two essential pieces of the puzzle. Improvements to standards and assessments will not in and of themselves result in dramatic improvements in student outcomes. Rather, they set high expectations for learning and provide educators with tools to monitor student progress towards those expectations. What we have learned from high-performing countries and high-performing districts domestically is that, in order to succeed at improving the college and career readiness of our students, we must develop an aligned and coherent system of standards, curriculum and instruction, assessment, professional development, and student support programs, with all of these components contributing to an authentic process of continuous improvement in all phases of daily educational practice.

To say that we are experiencing a watershed moment in the history of education in our country is an understatement. We are poised to make incredible progress in advancing the preparation of our nation's students for college and career. We have an opportunity to fulfill the promises we have been making to our children for decades—that when they graduate from high school they will be ready for college and work. ACT's research has identified strategies that can help our nation meet this goal. But there is still much to be done, and a reauthorized ESEA can help accomplish it. We look forward to helping make college and career readiness a reality for each and every student.

I look forward to answering any questions you may have.