

# Will States Swap Standards-Based Tests for SAT, ACT?

By Catherine Gewertz

High school testing is on the brink of a profound shift, as states increasingly choose college-entrance exams to measure achievement. The new federal education law invites that change, but it comes with some big caution signs and unanswered questions.

The questions are hanging over a provision of the Every Student Succeeds Act that lets states measure high school achievement with college-entrance exams instead of standards-based assessments.

If many states make that change, it would represent an important national shift in the meaning of high school testing, assessment experts say.

That's because most states' current tests are based on their academic standards and are built to measure mastery of those standards. Moving to a college-entrance exam such as the SAT or ACT, which are designed to predict the likelihood of students' success in college, would mean that states had chosen instead to measure college readiness.

"It's a really big shift," said Wayne Camara, who helped design the SAT and oversaw research at the College Board for two decades before taking a similar post at ACT in 2014. "States need to think about what they want their accountability system to measure and choose the test best suited for that. Ultimately, it's a judgment. It depends on what you value most."

Many states offer or require the SAT or ACT statewide as a way to get students thinking about, and applying to, college. But few use those tests for the accountability reports that are required by federal law.

Seven states have won permission from the U.S. Department of Education to use SAT or ACT for federal accountability. But a spokeswoman for the department said the states still must present evidence, through the peer-review process, that the exams are valid for that purpose. Colorado, Connecticut, Maine, and New Hampshire won approval to use the SAT for federal accountability, and Arkansas, Wisconsin, and Wyoming got the nod to use the ACT that way.

ACT officials said they're talking with 10 other states that are interested in following suit. The College Board appears to be gearing up for something similar. A spokesman said that in response to states' requests, the College Board has conducted studies to determine how well the exam reflects state standards and is "committed to working with state leaders to develop an accountability system that meets their specific needs."

## Valid, But for What Purpose?

It isn't clear yet exactly which "nationally recognized high school academic assessments" the Education Department will consider acceptable, since regulations and guidance to implement the new Every Student Succeeds Act haven't yet been written. Sources familiar with the discussions that produced ESSA said that



legislators had the SAT and ACT in mind. But other tests could win approval if states propose them and demonstrate that they're valid for accountability.

How well a national exam can reflect state standards is a central—and unanswered—question in the use of college-entrance exams for accountability purposes.

FairTest, a group that opposes standardized testing, warned that that provision in the new law "must be treated with caution; those tests are no better educationally than existing state tests, and they have not been validated to assess high school academic performance." The college-entrance exams have long been criticized, too, as biased in favor of wealthier students from college-educated families.

Sound assessment practice requires that a test be validated for its specific intended use. But there are no independent research studies analyzing how well the newest versions of the SAT or ACT reflect the depth and breadth of the Common Core State Standards, which are used by more than 40 states. States that use other standards would have to obtain their own "alignment" studies.

Without that kind of evidence, testing experts said, states are on shaky ground if they use a college-entrance exam to measure mastery of their content standards.

"How can a state tell teachers to teach the standards, and then use a test that hasn't been proven to align [to them]?" said Scott F. Marion, the executive director of the Center for Assessment, which helps states design testing systems. "It's a major problem. It's like a bait-and-switch."

If, on the other hand, states wish to make college readiness a key metric in their accountability systems, college-entrance exams could be a better fit, experts said.

One danger, however, lies in what use states make of college-entrance-exam data. Using it to measure students' likelihood of success in college is one thing, but using it to make judgments about the effectiveness of a school, a principal, or a teacher would be another, assessment experts cautioned.

"Tests like the SAT or ACT can measure college readiness, but whether they can measure a teacher's or a school's contribution to college readiness is an open question," said Laress L. Wise, the immediate-past president of the National Council on Measurement in Education, which sets standards for best practice in assessment.

Because students come to school with such varied levels of preparation, snapshot performance on college-entrance exams wouldn't be a valid way to compare schools' effectiveness, Wise said. Instead, states might want to consider using growth in college readiness, rather than a snapshot, for their accountability systems, to show their schools' power to boost their students' college readiness over time, he said.

One of the aims of including the new high school testing option in the law was to allow states to reduce the testing burden by making double-duty use of the college-entrance exams that many administer widely anyway. Another payoff could be tackling the perennial problem of student motivation: High school students aiming for college might be more inclined to try hard on a college-entrance exam, while they often don't see the point in doing their best on state tests with no personal consequences.

But that double-duty use comes with some big questions.

"We should ask what it would do to the high school experience," said Gregory J. Cizek, a professor of educational measurement and evaluation at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "To be successful [in accountability], schools will have to morph their curricula into college-prep curricula. Things are going to get left out that high schools value that SAT and ACT content standards don't."

*Coverage of the implementation of college- and career-ready standards is supported in part by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Education Week retains sole editorial control over the content of this coverage.*