

# Looking At The ISSUES

June 30, 2006

## **The ACT: Ohio's "Real" High Stakes Test**

*Canton City, Canton Local and Jackson Local Use Full EPAS System*

Ohio is an ACT state. Over two-thirds (67%) of all high school seniors in Ohio will take the ACT college admissions test. For these students and the state, the stakes are far higher than many imagine.

Do well on the ACT (scores of 21 and higher) and you begin to eliminate the need for remedial coursework at many colleges and universities. At Stark State College of Technology, for instance, an ACT composite of 22 indicates that students are ready for college level courses. A score of 21 in English eliminates the need for a placement test at Cleveland State. Do even better (23 or higher) and you begin to qualify for additional grants (not loans) or scholarships at many institutions, such as Kent State, to help finance college.

Ohio's dilemma is two-fold. First, average ACT scores have remained flat (21.4) in this state for the last four years. Second, the freshman remediation rate at Ohio public colleges and universities is 38%, a figure that has been slowly on the rise since 2001. Students who have to take remedial coursework graduate from college at lower rates. Over two-thirds of the students who fail remedial coursework on their first try don't return to college at all.

Here's what the Ohio Board of Regents says, "incoming freshmen (who) had average ACT scores greater than 24 had graduation rates of 84.5%, compared to graduation rates of 37.4% for schools where the incoming freshmen had average ACT scores less than 21."

Part of the problem is that Ohio has never required a solid academic core, with subjects like Algebra II, for all students. Even rigorous high school courses (see following article) may not be aligned with what colleges require. As Ohio has no college readiness standards, this adds to the confusion.

In Stark County, students in 11 of our districts average 22 or higher on the ACT, above the state average, attesting to the general strength of the curriculum here. Yet, there are ways to increase these scores and three districts, Canton City, Canton Local and Jackson Local, are taking the lead. A fourth district, North Canton, is considering joining them. The strategy is a simple one, begin preparing students for the ACT in middle school, have teachers monitor the outcomes and adjust curriculum and instruction accordingly.

*"What does it take to align high school standards with "college-ready" standards? A clear, consistent definition of "college ready" from state postsecondary institutions."*

-American Diploma Project  
to the Ohio Partnership for  
Continued Learning  
(September 2005).

### *Questions or Comments?*

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This is possible because of ACT's testing system known as EPAS, actually a series of three tests. EXPLORE is given in the 8th grade, PLAN at the 10th, and the ACT in 11th or 12th grades. All three tests are correlated and aligned with ACT's Standards for College Readiness. As early as the 8th grade, districts using this system can monitor whether their students are on track for college and high ACT scores.

Unfortunately, Ohio does not fund the EPAS system and only about 8% of Ohio's 8th graders take EXPLORE, the first test in the series. Tests are additional expenses to districts already trying to execute an ambitious state testing program based on K-12 standards. While it's too early to report on results from Canton City, Canton Local and Jackson Local, one entire state, Oklahoma, already uses the full EPAS system. Here's what they've found:

- The average ACT composite score in Oklahoma rose from 20.0 in 1992 to 20.5 in 2002, outpacing the national growth in scores during this period.
- The college-going rate rose from 51 percent in 1997 (when participation in EPAS reached a critical mass number of districts) to 58 percent in 2002.
- The proportion of African American students taking core coursework has risen from 38 percent to 51 percent since EPAS was implemented.

### Alignment Study

Since Ohio has no college readiness standards, a fair question to ask is "How closely are high school and college courses aligned?" If students do well in high school, can they eliminate the need for remediation at college?

The second in a series of studies by the Stark Education Partnership on the relationship between the ACT test, college readiness, and Ohio's K-12 standards focuses on ACT's COMPASS/ESL college placement test. If students do not score high enough on the ACT, many will take the COMPASS test. High scores here can also eliminate the need for remedial coursework.

Funded in part by a grant from the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation, a new study, *Alignment: A Local High School/College Model to Eliminate Remediation*, has now been released and is available at [www.edpartner.org](http://www.edpartner.org). Canton City teachers and Stark State professors reviewed the alignment of Canton's high school courses to Stark State's entry level courses. This study shows areas in which both curricula can be adjusted. Further, the study created a model which can be used by other school districts and college partners throughout the state.

One major finding of the study is that the degree of alignment is actually quite good, provided students take a solid core of academic courses through 12th grade, precisely what is being proposed in Governor Taft's OhioCore proposal.

## Looking At The Week

Adrienne O'Neill attended the Model Schools conference held in Orlando Florida on June 24 through June 28, 2006.

Joe Rochford made a presentation using the document *Changing the Culture* available at [www.edpartner.org](http://www.edpartner.org) to the newly formed Canton Regional Chamber of Commerce Education Steering Committee, chaired by Randy Snow on June 27th.

Dr. Rochford has been appointed to the Walsh University Advisory Board.