

The Workforce Board of Northern Cook County

Pathways to the Workforce in Northern Cook County Executive Summary for Discussion Purposes

Introduction

The Workforce Board of Northern Cook County is charged with insuring that employers have access to a pipeline of skilled workers in north and northwest suburban Cook County. Understanding how well we are preparing our youth for success in the workplace and post secondary education is particularly relevant to the local economy and its ability to attract and retain businesses requiring a highly skilled workforce. In the next five years, labor market projections indicate that the number of jobs in Metropolitan Chicago requiring an associate degree will grow by 23,822 and jobs requiring a bachelor's degree will increase by 88,834. Additionally, there will be increased demand for new entrants into the workforce as many Baby Boomer workers retire.

In today's world, a high school diploma is viewed as a "stepping stone" in the process of preparing for and obtaining a high skill, high wage job. As skill requirements for future, high demand jobs increase, so too will the training and educational requirements. But, unfortunately, a high school diploma is not a guarantee students will be successful in post secondary programs. Statistics indicate that 30% of incoming first-year college students are required to enroll in remedial courses, and only a minority of those students end up earning a degree."¹

Nor is a high school diploma a guarantee that an individual possesses the skills that employers are expecting or needing – even for entry level jobs. According to employers, the majority of their new job entrants that are recent high school graduates lack the most important skills needed to succeed in the workplace. While basic skills are still fundamental to any workforce entrant's ability to perform on the job, employers indicate that they need individuals that possess the following applied skills such as professionalism/work ethic, oral and written communication, teamwork/collaboration, and critical thinking/problem solving:²

The underlying principal of the Youth Council's strategic plan is to ensure that the future workers have the foundational education needed to succeed in the workplace and post secondary education. A first step in this process is determining how well youth are currently being prepared for work and post secondary education. Holland & Knight was contracted to gather the information needed to assess preparedness of youth in the local workforce area, examine successful practices that can be replicated and expanded; and recommend strategies to improve youth preparedness for work and training beyond high school.

The Pathways to the Workforce in Northern Cook County examines the performance of Northern Cook County students in terms of "post-secondary education and work-readiness." These terms are not intended to refer to separate and distinct standards. Rather, students need to be educated to comparable levels of readiness in Reading and Mathematics, regardless of plans to pursue post-secondary education or workforce training.¹ To prepare students for success in the modern economy, and to ensure the economic prosperity of Northern Cook County and the region, all Northern Cook County students should be educated to commonly held post-secondary education and work-readiness standards.

¹ *The Connection Strategy*, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2007, page 3.

² *The Connection Strategy*, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2007, page 9.

The State of the Workforce in Northern Cook County

The Workforce Board of Northern Cook County is located within Cook County – the county with the third-highest per capita personal income in the state, after Lake and DuPage Counties.ⁱⁱ Job sectors in the Northern Cook County area that are expected to grow the fastest from 2006 – 2016 include healthcare support occupations (32.37%, 5,384 jobs); protective service occupations (law enforcement, fire fighters, etc.) (27.67 %, 3,037 jobs); and health practitioners and technicians (25.53%, 8,466 jobs). Job sectors exclusive of the foregoing that will likely add the greatest number of jobs include office and administrative support occupations (11,503 jobs), food preparation and serving (9,119 jobs), transportation and material moving occupations (5,506 jobs) and sales and related occupations (5,141 jobs).ⁱⁱⁱ Similar to the greater Chicago metropolitan region, the Northern Cook County area is expected to see rapid development in two distinct categories of jobs – those that are high-paying and that require higher education, such as in the healthcare field, and jobs that pay less, require less education, and are less secure, such as food service and administrative support.

The public high school districts for Northern Cook County include districts 202 (Evanston Township); 203 (New Trier); 207 (Maine East, Maine South, Maine West); 211 (J B Conant, WM Fremd, Hoffman Estates, Palatine, Schaumburg); 214 (Buffalo Grove, Elk Grove, John Hersey, Prospect, Rolling Meadows, Wheeling); 219 (Niles West and Niles North); and 225 (Glenbrook North and Glenbrook South). By most measures, Northern Cook County public high schools compare favorably with their counterparts from across the state. Nine Northern Cook County high schools were recently recognized as being among the best in the Chicagoland area.^{iv} Furthermore, the performance of all high schools in Northern Cook County meets or exceeds the State of Illinois average for all schools on the PSAE.^v

Data Analysis

In order to evaluate high school students' work readiness, this report analyzes data resulting from the following measures:

- **The Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE):** Percentage of students at the "Meets or Exceeds" performance level established by the State Board of Education in Math and Reading.
- **ACT:** Percentage of students meeting ACT College Readiness Benchmarks in Math and Reading.
- **WorkKeys:** Percentage of students at various "Work Ready Levels" derived from the WorkKeys Applied Math and Reading for Information assessments.
- **Community College Placement/Remediation Determinations:** Percent of students attending community colleges not requiring remedial Math or Reading coursework during the first postsecondary year.

These data points allowed an assessment of students' readiness for both postsecondary education and entry into the workforce and an evaluation of student performance against established standards and benchmarks. The data analyzed demonstrates that Northern Cook County can and should consider policies to ensure its high schools prepare more students to compete in tomorrow's economy.

- A large percentage of students in Northern Cook County are not achieving college- and work-ready levels, regardless of the measure used.
- There is a dramatic difference in performance and work-ready levels among the various subgroups in Northern Cook County.
- PSAE performance does not translate into college-readiness as determined by ACT.

Key points on the observation from the Data

Area-wide Data:

- In math, the number of students achieving the Meets or Exceeds level on the PSAE was 15 percentage points higher than the number achieving the ACT College Ready Benchmarks.
- There is a dramatic drop-off in performance between the "All students" and White students performance and the performance of the Black, Hispanic, and Low-income subgroups. The percentage of black, Hispanic, and low-income students meeting each of the benchmarks is 25 percentage points lower than the percentage of all students in Northern Cook County meeting the benchmarks, and 30 percentage points lower than the percentage of white students meeting the benchmarks.
- The difference is especially apparent when comparing percentage of students in various subgroups who meet the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks. 3.5 times more students in the White subgroup meet the ACT College Readiness Benchmark in math than students in the Black subgroup.
- The percentage of students at the "Meets or Exceeds" level on the PSAE is roughly comparable to the percentage of students that are "Work Ready" on the WorkKeys. However, a significantly smaller percentage of students meet the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks.

School-level Data:

- There is more of a variance between the performance levels of the lowest- and highest-performing schools on the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks than either the WorkKeys or PSAE. The difference between the performance levels of the lowest-performing and highest-performing school is 21.15 percentage points for WorkKeys, 26.63 percentage points for PSAE, and 38.40 percentage points for ACT.
- At eight high schools, PSAE scores demonstrate that approximately two-thirds of students are meeting State expectations, while only approximately half of the students are achieving the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks.
- Generally, the percentage of students enrolled in non-remedial math is:
 - Higher than the percentage of students meeting the college readiness benchmarks; and
 - Lower than the percentage of students at the "Meets or Exceeds" level on the PSAE or the "Work Readiness Levels" on the WorkKeys.
- At 14 out of the 20 schools, 30% or more of students entering community college are required to take remedial math courses. At 18 out of 20 schools, 25% or more of students entering community college are required to take remedial math courses.

Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE)

For high school students, ISBE develops and administers the Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE) in accordance with federal and state law.^{vi} The PSAE measures students' achievement relative to the Learning Standards for Reading, Mathematics, Science, and Writing.^{vii} As part of the PSAE, Illinois students take the ACT multiple-choice tests, the optional ACT Writing Test, the WorkKeys Reading for Information test, the WorkKeys Applied Math Test, and an ISBE-developed Science assessment.^{viii}

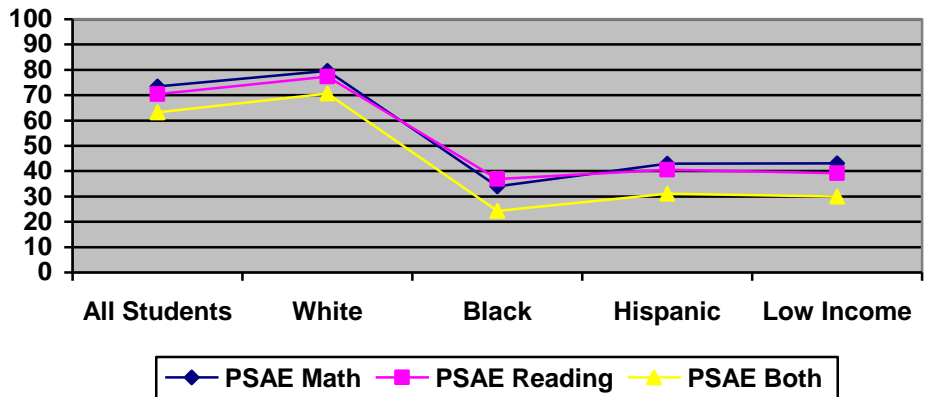
ACT

The ACT test system is based on the premise that an absolute, uniform standard of knowledge and skills is necessary for success in post-secondary education.^{ix} ACT tests are designed to directly measure academic skills needed to complete college-level work.^x ACT test results may be used both as a measure of student knowledge and skill levels and as a predictor of high school students' future academic success. Because the ACT is designed to produce scale scores representing consistent levels of achievement over time and across test formats, the ACT test is a useful tool for measuring both current student levels and changes in those levels over time.^{xi}

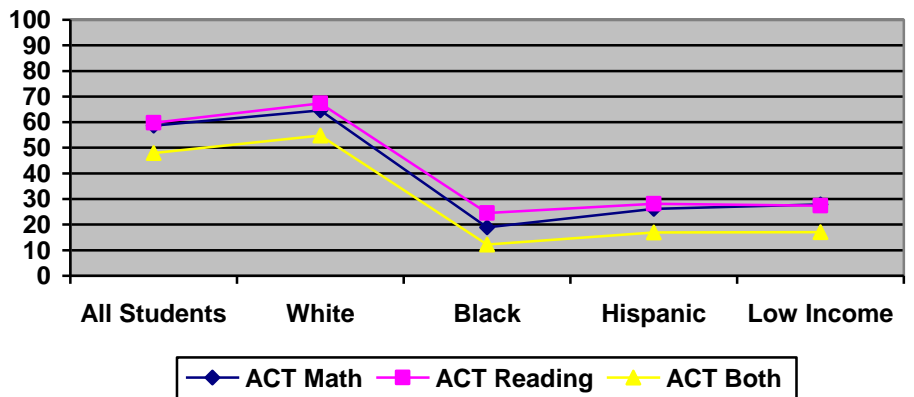
WorkKeys Work Ready

WorkKeys assessments are designed to measure students' real-world skills.^{xii} Among the various WorkKeys assessments developed by ACT, three WorkKeys tests relate specifically to skills identified as critical to success in employment: Reading for Information, Applied Mathematics, and Locating Information.^{xiii} Students in Illinois take the WorkKeys Reading for Information and Applied Mathematics tests as part of the PSAE.^{xiv} The WorkKeys Locating Information test is not incorporated as part of the PSAE. WorkKeys test scores signify that an individual has attained at least a certain level of skill relevant to the work setting.^{xv}

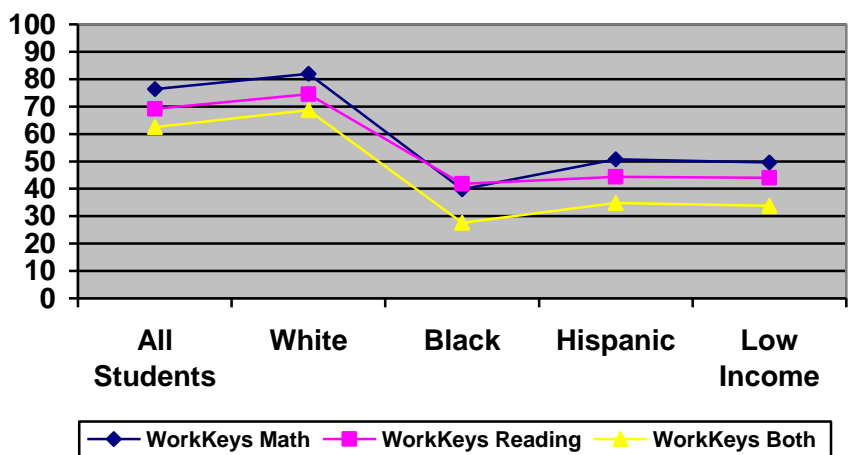
Percentage that Meet or Exceed Standards on 2006-2009 PSAE



Percentage that Meet or Exceed Standards on 2006-2009 PSAE ACT Scores



Percentage that Meet or Exceed Standards on 2006-2009 PSAE WorkKeys Scores

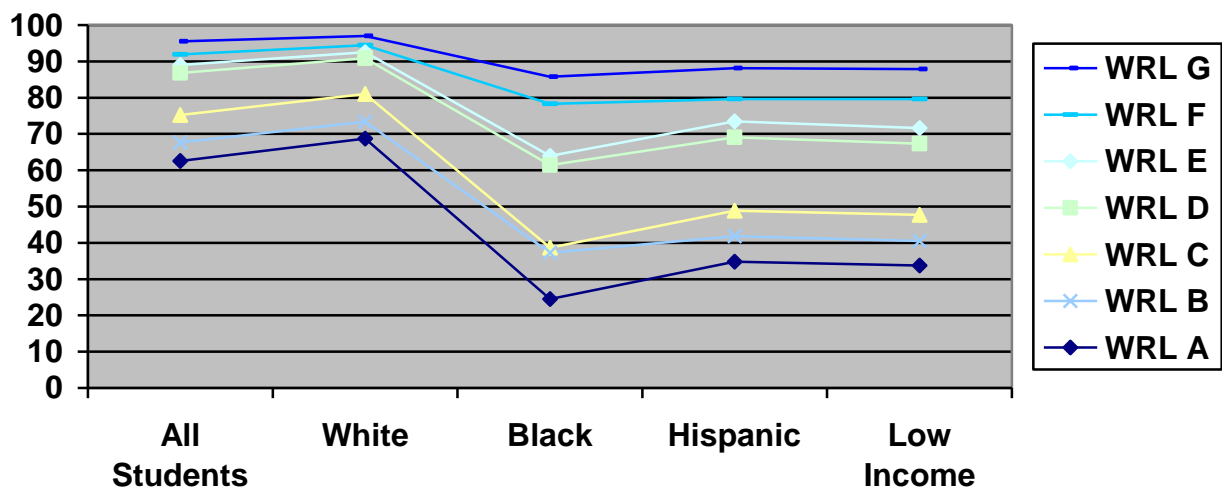


Work-Readiness Analysis

With respect to work readiness, a "Work-Ready Level" (WRL) indicator is used that was developed specifically for this report to facilitate analysis of Northern Cook County high school students' work readiness in relation to key Northern Cook County industry sectors, based on available WorkKeys assessment data. The WRL indicator is divided into eight categories.

In order to contextualize WRL indicator data, a database was created for this report based on the WorkKeys database discussed above. In this database, a list of jobs was compiled that fall into key Northern Cook County industry sectors based on the author's analysis. The authors then identified, based on the WorkKeys database, the WorkKeys Applied Mathematics and Reading for Information scores required for each job in our database. Next, the WRL level was determined for employment in a given job. Based on the database content, the authors were able to identify the percentage of Northern Cook County high school students on a county-wide, subgroup, and school level, who are potentially qualified for various jobs in key industry sectors. The WRL indicator is useful because it provides a more detailed method for measuring the percentage of students who possess combinations of skills relevant to Northern Cook County job opportunities.

Work Readiness and Jobs in Key Metropolitan Chicago-Area Industry Sectors



Work Readiness Levels

Work Readiness Level G	19 jobs; Average salary \$29,982.88
Work Readiness Level F	47 jobs; Average salary \$34,759.33
Work Readiness Level E	6 jobs; Average salary \$25,178.69
Work Readiness Level D	28 jobs; Average salary \$49,070.60
Work Readiness Level C	8 jobs; Average salary \$55,778.33
Work Readiness Level B	14 jobs; Average salary \$64,657.76
Work Readiness Level A	27 jobs; Average salary \$71,311.87

Key points on the observation from the data:

- There are dramatic differences between the work-ready levels of the "All students" and White groups, versus the Black, Hispanic, and Low-income subgroups, particularly at the higher WRL levels associated with higher pay and industries projected to grow quickly in Northern Cook County and the metropolitan Chicago region, such as healthcare.

- No subgroup is ever equal to or greater than the % of "All students" at a given WRL.
- WRL D is significant because it is the mid-point of WRL indicators.
- There are some observable differences between the work-ready levels of the Black, Hispanic, and Low-income subgroups.
- The Black, Hispanic, and Low-income subgroups do not exceed 75% until WRL F.

Moving Forward

Workforce Development College and Work Ready Agenda

1. All high schools should deliver Standards-aligned instructional systems, and establish graduation requirements that ensure all students access a rigorous core academic curriculum.
2. High school assessment systems should measure progress toward meeting college- and work-ready expectations, and identify students that are on-track to remediation; serve as placement tests for college and hiring; and promote rigor and consistency in instruction.
3. High schools should make relevant connections to academic and career interests, and prepare students to transition to postsecondary and the workforce.
4. Through data and public focus, high schools should be held accountable for graduating students who are ready for post-secondary education and training or employment.

References

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- ⁱ ACT, *Ready for College and Ready for Work: Same or Different?* (2006), p. 1, available online at www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/ReadinessBrief.pdf (last visited June 30, 2008).
- ⁱⁱ U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, Personal Income and Per Capita Personal Income by County for Illinois 2005 – 2007, available online at www.bea.gov/regional (last visited October 29, 2009).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Illinois Department of Employment Security Occupational Employment Projections, available online at <http://lmi.ides.state.il.us/projections/wkinvestlt.htm> (last visited October 29, 2009).
- ^{iv} See, e.g., the Chicago Tribune list of top Chicagoland schools, available online at www.chicagotribune.com/media/acrobat/2009-10/50168344.pdf (last visited October 30, 2009).
- ^v PS&E meets/exceeds data available on the Illinois Interactive Report Card website, www.iirc.niu.edu (last visited October 30, 2009).
- ^{vi} 20 U.S.C. § 6311; see also Illinois School Code provisions governing state goals and assessment at 105 ILCS 5/2-3.64.
- ^{vii} ISBE, "Student Assessment: Prairie State Achievement Examination (PS&E)," available online at www.isbe.net/assessment/psae.htm (last visited October 26, 2009). In Illinois, ISBE conducted a review of the Illinois Learning Standards and the ACT tests to determine the extent to which the ACT aligned with Illinois Learning Standards. This study revealed "substantial agreement between the ACT Test and the Illinois Learning Standards." Furthermore, ACT College Readiness Standards are included in the Illinois Learning Standards. See ACT and the Illinois State Board of Education, *Prairie State Achievement Examination: Technical Manual, 2006 Testing Cycle*, *supra* n. 19, p. 7. Accordingly, the ACT is an appropriate indicator for measurement of Illinois students' knowledge and skills and can be relied on as a consistent measure of students' levels with respect to Illinois Learning Standards.
- ^{viii} ISBE, "Student Assessment: Prairie State Achievement Examination (PS&E)," www.isbe.net/assessment/psae.htm (last visited October 26, 2009).
- ^{ix} ISBE, "Debunking the Myths of the PS&E," PowerPoint presentation by Becky McCabe, ISBE, Sherri Miller, ACT, and Rense Lange, ISBE.
- ^x ACT, *The ACT Technical Manual* (2007), p. 5, available online at www.act.org/aap/pdf/ACT_Technical_Manual.pdf (last visited November 19, 2009).
- ^{xi} ISBE, "Debunking the Myths of the PS&E," *supra* n. 166.
- ^{xii} ACT, *WorkKeys Assessments Technical Bulletin*, *supra* n. 96, p. 1.
- ^{xiii} *Id.*, p. 2.
- ^{xiv} ISBE, "Student Assessment: Prairie State Achievement Examination (PS&E)," *supra* n. 157.
- ^{xv} *Id.*