

A BIG WIN FOR ALABAMA STUDENTS



Alabama's College- and Career-Ready Standards

It is no secret that Alabama's students have long performed behind their peers in other states. Evidenced by the most recent Nation's Report Card (also known as the National Assessment of Educational Progress), fewer than one-third of Alabama's 4th and 8th grade students demonstrated proficiency in reading and math. In 2010, the State Board of Education adopted a new set of college- and career-ready standards that were higher, clearer, and more focused on the skills that matter most. This was a critical effort to raise the bar for Alabama students—one that had been set too low for far too long.

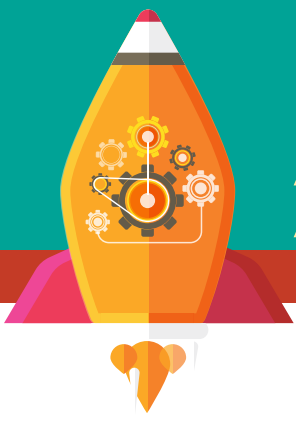
Alabama's Proficiency on the Nation's Report Card

Year	4th Math	4th Reading	8th Math	8th Reading
2011	27%	31%	20%	26%
2013	30%	31%	20%	25%

Before adopting college- and career-ready standards, Alabama's academic standards were too numerous and lacked necessary depth, going a mile wide and an inch deep. This resulted in standards that were often unclear and missing specific expectations. In the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's 2007 *Leaders and Laggards* report, Alabama received an F in both academic achievement and postsecondary workforce readiness. Students were not adequately prepared, and the consequences were troubling. In 2011, although 77% of Alabama's 8th grade students scored proficient on the state test, only 15% reached proficiency on the more rigorous Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS). As a result, students were graduating from high school without the skills necessary for success in college and careers. In 2013, 33% of in-state freshmen had to enroll in a remedial course because they lacked the skills for college-level work.

Teachers across Alabama have been hard at work putting the higher standards in place since their adoption in 2010. It has been a significant undertaking involving countless hours of professional development, aligning curricula and instructional materials, and creating ways to engage students more deeply in learning.

With the adoption of the improved standards, Alabama is one step closer to ensuring that students have opportunities to reach their full potential. This is critical, as 58% of jobs in Alabama will require a postsecondary credential by 2020, and only 32% of adults in the state currently meet this requirement. If changes are not made, Alabama's projected 26% skills gap will continue to hinder economic growth.



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Better Standards Deserve Better Assessments

The next phase of this work is to implement an aligned assessment that is more meaningful to students, teachers, and parents in determining which skills a student has or has not yet mastered. Alabama needs a test that can measure the critical-thinking and problem-solving skills that our students need to succeed. Existing state tests cannot evaluate this level of learning. Improved assessments present an opportunity to move beyond tests that measure rote memorization.

Putting better assessments in place is not enough. They need to be part of a larger system of accountability that supports student achievement and holds schools responsible for successfully teaching the content and skills outlined in the standards. At the heart of accountability is the need to ensure that all students across Alabama receive the same high-quality education.

Meaningful tests serve as school wide academic checkups that can identify struggling students and schools in need of extra support and interventions. In addition, improved assessments can identify high-achieving students who require support to maintain their academic engagement and provide them with resources to continue to excel.

In 2013, the Alabama Department of Education adopted the ACT Aspire to measure college and career readiness. This assessment system contains interim classroom assessments that can be given at various points throughout the year to identify when students require additional supports or challenges. Test questions will no longer simply require students to fill in a bubble, but will instead ask them to think critically, analyze, and explain their reasoning, giving a more accurate picture of student progress. Students in grades 3–8 will take both the math and reading tests this spring, and high school students in Algebra 1 and English 10 will take end-of-course exams.

During this transition, it is important to advocate for key criteria that will make Alabama state tests a strong measure of how students are doing on the path to college and careers both at the state and national levels. Leaders are optimistic about the ACT Aspire because it includes so many of the criteria that make up a high-quality assessment.

A High-Quality Assessment:

- Is developed with input from academic and test experts—and, most importantly, from teachers.
- Is field tested and reviewed before full implementation.
- Assesses a wide range of real-world skills using a variety of question formats.
- Includes formative or interim assessments that act as academic checkups to ensure that students are keeping pace.
- Provides detailed and timely feedback that sends an early warning signal to teachers if students are struggling so that interventions can be put in place.
- Is comparable across states so that students who move from one state to another will be held to the same standards and have a smoother transition.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is the difference between curriculum and standards?

- Standards are a set of guidelines for what students are expected to know and be able to do at specific points in their education. Standards provide the foundation for key components of the education system, including curricula, instructional materials, teacher training, and assessments.
- A curriculum is the course of study covering the standards. It is set by local school districts and includes lesson plans, programs, and textbooks that teachers use to teach the content and skills outlined in the standards.

2. If students are learning with different curricula, how can they take the same test?

- Although teachers use different materials and curricula, students still learn the same skills outlined in the standards. Teachers can be creative in their instruction, designing lessons to best reach their students and establishing a classroom where all students can achieve.

3. Will the new test replace the old state test?

- Yes, the ACT Aspire will replace the Alabama Reading and Mathematics Test for students in grades 3–8. Students in high school will take the ACT end-of-course tests in Algebra 1 and English 10.

4. How will scores impact students?

- There are currently no test score requirements for graduation or promotion, but end-of-course tests in high school will count for 20% of the final course grade.

5. Will scores impact teacher evaluations?

- Currently, tests scores are not used as a factor in teacher evaluations.



The Alabama College- and Career-Ready Standards:

- Better prepare students for the jobs of the future.
- Help students develop the critical-thinking and problem-solving skills that employers demand.
- Help students compete for the best jobs across the nation and around the world.

Better Assessments:

- Provide an honest, objective report on how our students are doing.
- Ensure that all students are held to the same expectations.
- Identify struggling students so that they can get help.

What is ACT Aspire?

- ACT Aspire is a standards-based assessment system that gauges student progression from grades 3–10 in English, reading, writing, mathematics, and science.

6. How will test scores impact schools and districts?

- Schoolwide test results will be used as one measure for school accountability. Just as tests are used as academic checkups for individual students, they also serve as checkups on our schools. Districts need to identify struggling students and schools in need of support so that interventions can be put in place to ensure that all students in Alabama receive a high-quality education.

7. What kind of professional development teachers receive in preparation for the standards and the new test?

- The Alabama Reading Initiative and the Alabama Math, Science, & Technology Initiative aligned their support with the new standards so teachers could receive specific coaching as they implemented the new standards.
- The State Department of Education provides ongoing support through quarterly professional development meetings about the standards. The meetings, held regionally across the state, feature teams from every district to gather new information to share with their schools. These face-to-face meetings are supplemented with online training and resource sharing through an online portal hosted by the Alabama State Department of Education, ALEX (the Alabama Learning Exchange). The Alabama Best Practices Center, a non profit partner of the State Department of Education, also leads networking workshops regularly for superintendents, principals, teachers, and instructional coaches to share resources and practices that are working well in the classrooms.

8. What kind of data will be collected? Will it be released?

- Under the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Alabama is required to collect data on school performance. Aggregate data collected includes student test scores and information such as attendance, support services, and academic growth. *The state will not release any personally identifiable student information.* Only individuals who interact with students on a daily basis, such as teachers and parents, are permitted to see student-specific information. Federal law protects the privacy

of student information and education records through the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). The only information that will be publicly available will contain aggregate data for schools, districts, and subgroups.

9. How were teachers involved in the test development process?

- The State Board of Education formed the Assessment and Accountability Task Force, composed of elementary and secondary education leaders from different districts across Alabama. The task force was charged with reviewing the various assessment tools to ensure alignment with the Alabama College and Career Ready Standards, it was also charged with recommending a balanced assessment system to provide meaningful measures used primarily to inform instruction. The task force began meeting in September 2011 and continues to meet as the new assessments are implemented.

10. Do students need to be computer literate?

- Schools and districts may test their students with computer-based or paper-pencil assessments. Many are choosing to test with a combination of the two.
- While it may take time to ensure that every school has the hardware necessary to meet the technology requirements, this is a smart investment. Technology is not going away. Ensuring that all students, regardless of geography or household income have equal access to technology is critical to prepare students for a 21st century competitive workforce.

11. Where can I go for more information?

- www.alabamagrit.org
- www.alsde.edu
- www.apluscollegeready.org/
- www.BusinessForCore.org