COLLEGE READINESS

ISSUES IN COLLEGE READINESS

Effective Use of EPAS® Helps Those Students Who Need Help the Most

Students at lower achievement levels gain substantially when their schools use ACT's EPAS effectively.

ACT maintains that monitoring academic strengths and weaknesses through the effective use of results from standardized tests can promote learning and intellectual growth. When schools use achievement test scores to guide curriculum choices and to provide feedback to students, opportunities for learning increase.

The ACT Educational Planning and Assessment System (EPAS®) consists of three testing programs: EXPLORE® for eighth and ninth grades, PLAN® for tenth grade, and the ACT® test for eleventh and twelfth grades. When used together, the three EPAS tests function as an interrelated sequence of instruments for monitoring students' educational development throughout their high school careers.

This study examined the scores of students who participated in all three of the EPAS testing programs and who attended schools identified as making effective use of EPAS. Our criteria for effective use are stringent, including discussion of scores with students and parents, use of student achievement data to inform curriculum decisions, and incorporation of the ACT College Readiness Standards™ into teaching plans.

Schools were identified as having showed either greater-than-expected average longitudinal score gains or greater-than-expected average longitudinal score losses. We then surveyed these schools to see how and to what extent they use their EPAS test results. According to our criteria, the schools that had shown score gains demonstrated substantially more effective use of EPAS results than the schools that had shown score losses. For example, schools with score gains were more likely to use students' EXPLORE and PLAN scores to pinpoint their strengths and weaknesses, help them decide what courses to take in the future, and assist them in making long-term educational plans.

Results for Effective-Use Schools

We ranked the schools by their level of EPAS usage and examined those in the upper one-third, the group we identified as effective-use schools. We then assigned each student in these schools a numerical index based on his or her performance relative to the growth expected from one EPAS program to the next. For example, a student with an EXPLORE Composite score of 13 in eighth grade is expected to score in the range of 13 to 17 on PLAN in tenth grade, and a student with a PLAN Composite score of 13 is expected to score in the range of 12 to 15 on the ACT. These expected ranges are based on all

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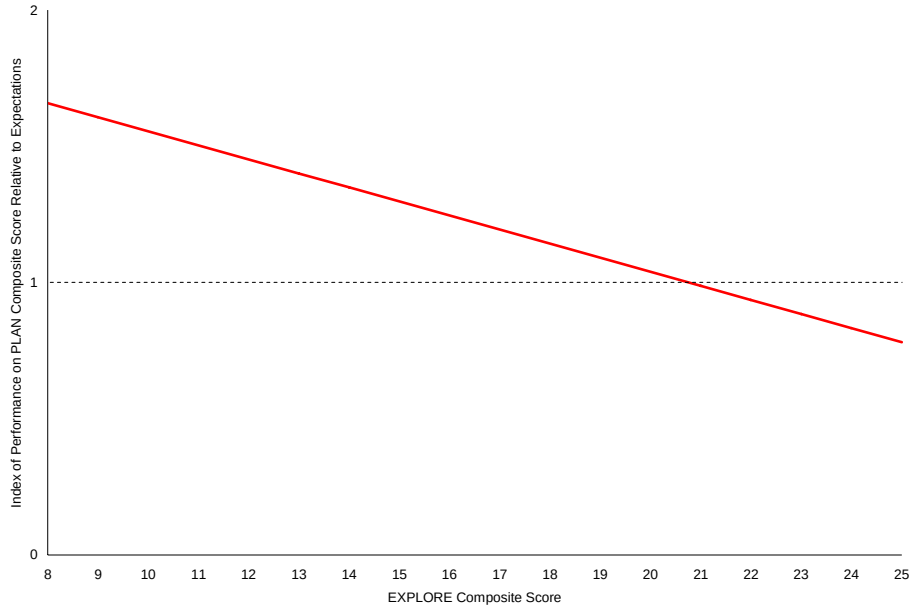
students who have taken EXPLORE and PLAN, or PLAN and the ACT, respectively, and so represent baselines (or "control groups") against which individual student performance can be compared. Students who score above the expected range can be thought of as outperforming their peers, while students who score below the expected range can be thought of as falling behind their peers.

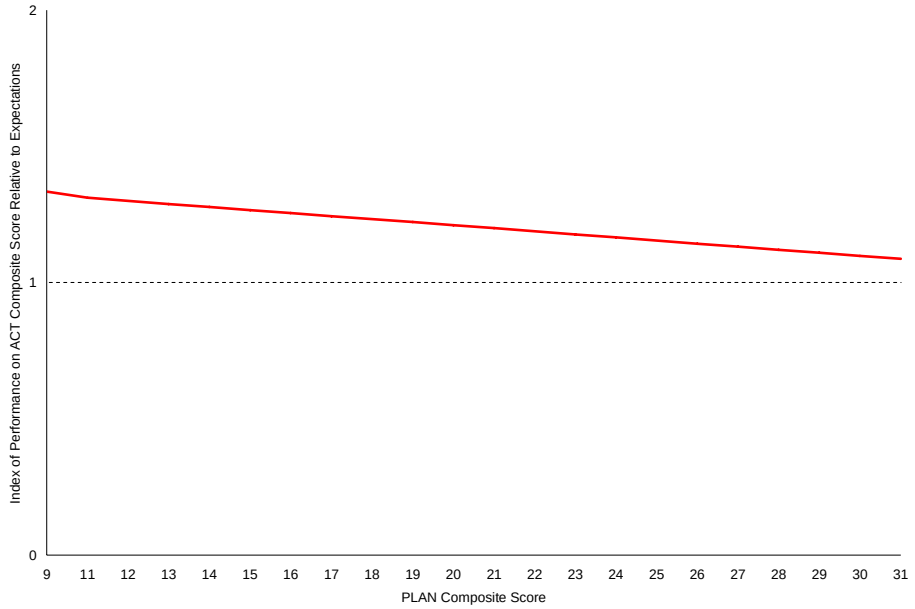
The students' indices of performance were then plotted against their scores on the lower grade-level test. The results appear in Figure 1 (performance on PLAN) and Figure 2 (performance on the ACT).

Figure 1
Relationship Between EXPLORE Composite Score and Performance on PLAN Composite Score Relative to Expectations



0 = PLAN score fell below predicted range
1 = PLAN score fell within predicted range
2 = PLAN score exceeded predicted range

Figure 2
Relationship Between PLAN Composite Score and Performance on ACT Composite Score Relative to Expectations



0 = ACT score fell below predicted range
1 = ACT score fell within predicted range
2 = ACT score exceeded predicted range

In Figure 1, the lower a student's EXPLORE score, the better the student performed on PLAN relative to expectations. In Figure 2, the lower a student's PLAN score, the better the student performed on the ACT relative to expectations (although the effect was less pronounced at this level). This does not mean that higher-scoring students performed *poorly* on the next EPAS test. Rather, it means that, both between EXPLORE and PLAN and between PLAN and the ACT, the largest score *gains* occur among those students who had the *lowest initial scores*. That is, students with lower EXPLORE scores tend to make greater gains on PLAN, and students with lower PLAN scores tend to make greater gains on the ACT, than students with higher scores on the earlier tests. This pattern holds for both males and females as well as for students in all racial/ethnic groups.

Summary

Effective use of EPAS involves using scores to identify students' strengths and weaknesses, help guide students, and inform curriculum decisions. This study shows that initially lower-scoring students attending schools with effective EPAS use experience greater-than-expected academic growth. This is true for both genders and all racial/ethnic groups. More important, this growth is most pronounced between eighth and tenth grades—the early years of high school, when students who perform well begin to establish themselves on the path to college and workforce training readiness. Schools that use EPAS effectively, therefore, are likely to help those students who need help most. It is crucial for

Effective Use of EPAS

Schools that use EPAS effectively engage in the following activities:

Discuss test results with students and parents, including the meaning of scores and aligning students' career goals with their course-taking plans.

Use student achievement levels to inform curriculum decisions, such as identifying gifted students or students in need of further developmental assistance and designing special programs to meet their needs.

Incorporate test goals and objectives into teaching plans, for example by using the ACT College Readiness Standards to help inform lesson plans and activities.

these students to make as much progress as possible toward the goal of succeeding in life no matter which path they choose after secondary school.