

Affirming the Goal:

Is College and Career Readiness an Internationally Competitive Standard?

Executive Summary

Moving from idiosyncratic sets of state standards to common standards focused on college and career readiness for all students is a monumental moment in our country's educational history. College and career readiness, defined through ACT research, is the level of preparation a student needs to be ready to enroll and succeed in—without remediation—a first-year, credit-bearing course at two- or four-year institutions or in trade or technical schools. ACT research also demonstrated that the level of knowledge and skills needed for workforce training programs after high school is comparable to that needed for college readiness. This convergence in the skills and knowledge that all students need to learn by the end of high school to be ready to succeed in college or career provides a common expectation for K-12 education, which is a first for our nation.

The Common Core State Standards in English language arts and mathematics are based on this definition of college and career readiness.

Is College and Career Readiness the Right Goal to Ensure the International Competitiveness of the United States?

While the Common Core State Standards were developed to be internationally competitive, empirical data were not available to determine whether the goal of college and career readiness or the Common Core Standards would be internationally competitive—that is, whether they represent a level of performance that will prepare our students to compete with the highest-performing countries around the world.

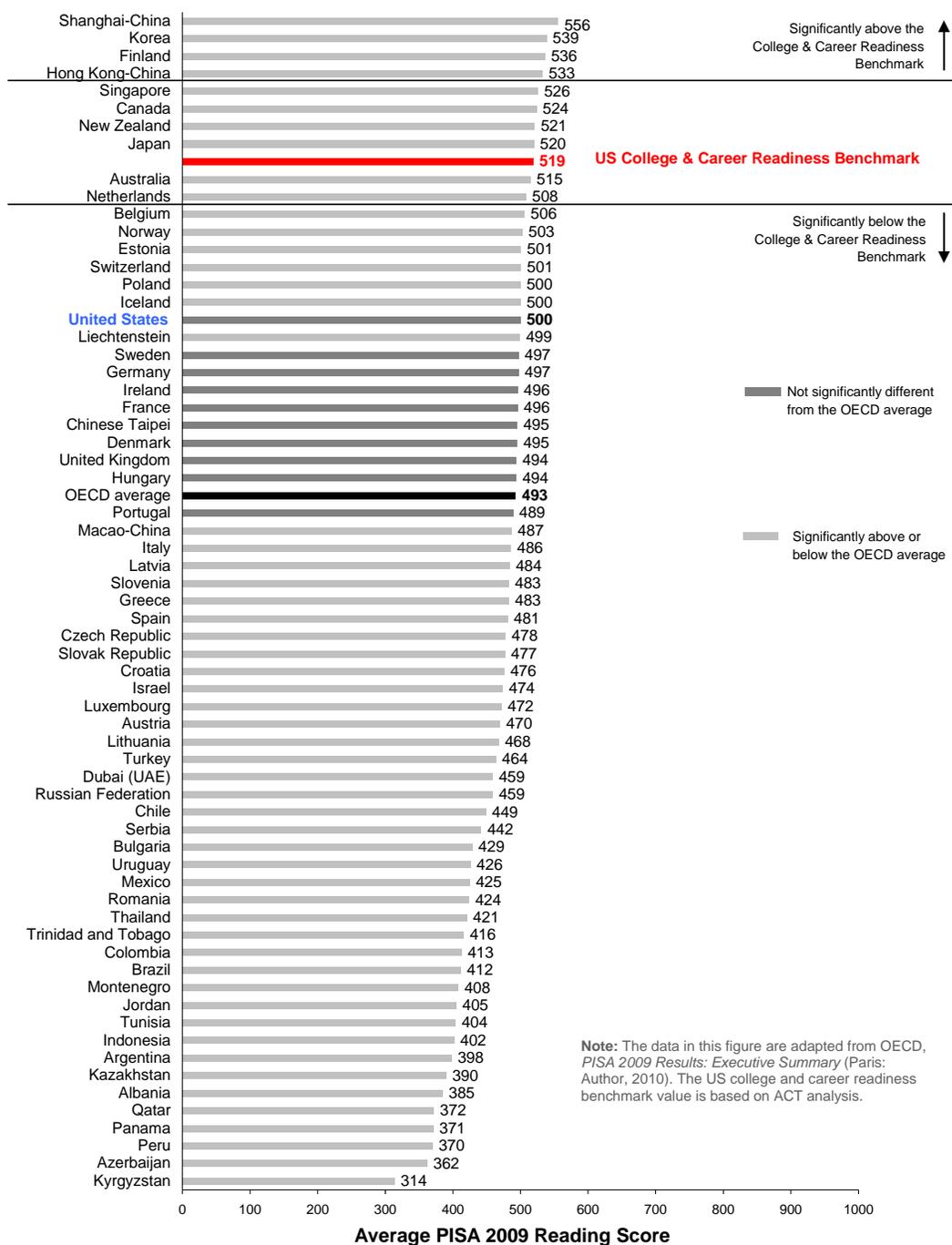
ACT examined the international competitiveness of college and career ready standards in the policy research report, *Affirming the Goal: Is College and Career Readiness an Internationally Competitive Standard?* In this study, ACT performed a linking analysis to identify the PISA scores in reading and mathematics that are equivalent to the college and career readiness benchmark scores on PLAN[®], ACT's tenth-grade college and career readiness assessment. These benchmark scores represent being on target for readiness.

The linking analysis was based on 2,248 US tenth-grade students from 77 high schools across the US who tested under standardized conditions with both PLAN and a special administration of PISA. By linking the tenth-grade college and career readiness benchmarks to the PISA scale, ACT determined if the college and career readiness performance standards for US students in these two subjects was competitive with the performance of students in other countries.

Results

The linking analysis affirms that the performance standards of college and career readiness—and therefore the new Common Core State Standards—are competitive with the highest performing nations in the world. In fact, the average scores of only four countries were significantly higher than the benchmark scores in reading and in mathematics. Because the benchmark scores fell well within the average scores of the highest performing countries, college and career readiness is the right goal for US education.

FIGURE 1
Tenth-Grade College and Career Readiness Performance Benchmark in Reading
Compared to the Performance of Countries on PISA 2009 Reading



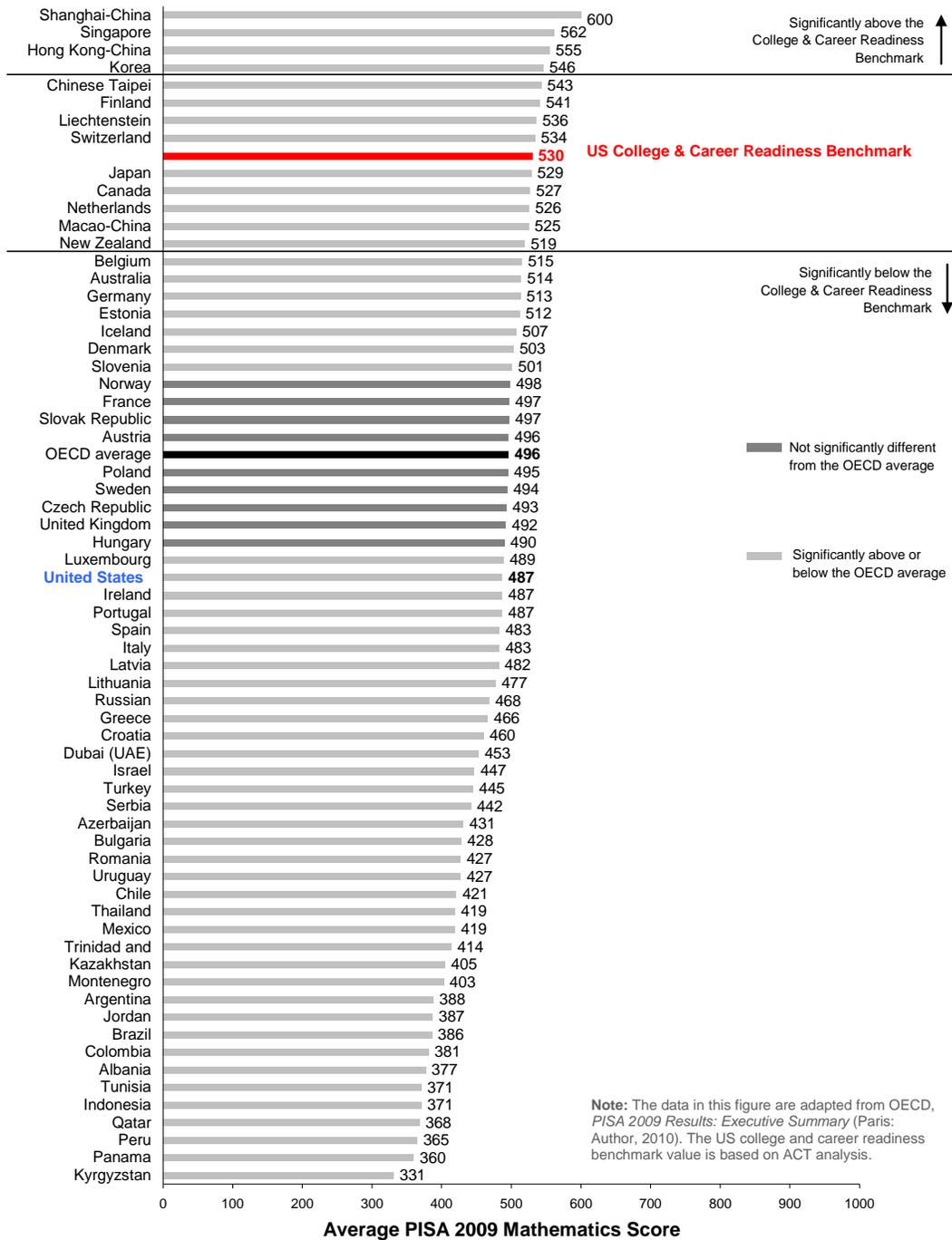
Note: The data in this figure are adapted from OECD, *PISA 2009 Results: Executive Summary* (Paris: Author, 2010). The US college and career readiness benchmark value is based on ACT analysis.

What does Figure 1 tell us about the college and career readiness performance standard, US performance on PISA, and the performance of other countries?

Reading:

- The tenth-grade college and career readiness benchmark (519) is among the range of the highest-performing countries and higher than the current OECD average (493).
- Current US performance (500) is 19 points lower than the college and career readiness benchmark.

FIGURE 2
Tenth-Grade College and Career Readiness Performance Benchmark in Mathematics
Compared to the Performance of Countries on PISA 2009 Mathematics



Note: The data in this figure are adapted from OECD, *PISA 2009 Results: Executive Summary* (Paris: Author, 2010). The US college and career readiness benchmark value is based on ACT analysis.

What does Figure 2 tell us about the college and career readiness performance standard, US performance on PISA, and the performance of other countries?

Mathematics:

- The tenth-grade college and career readiness benchmark (530) is among the range of the highest-performing countries, and higher than the current OECD average (496).
- Current US performance (487) is 43 points lower than the college and career readiness benchmark.

What are the Implications of College and Career Readiness as an Internationally Competitive Performance Standard?

The goal of ensuring that all high school graduates are ready for college and career is the right one for the U.S.

Getting the educational goal right is fundamental to successfully reforming US education so that the US and its citizens can remain economically competitive. The relationships between skills development, workforce productivity, and economic growth demand that high school graduates be college and career ready so that they can acquire the requisite skills and knowledge they will need to meet the demands of the changing and increasingly competitive global economy. College and career readiness is an essential step for the longer-term economic viability of the US.

U.S. college and career readiness is an internationally competitive educational standard.

As states implement the Common Core State Standards, students within these states will benefit knowing that the education standards they need to meet—the learning in which they will engage—will prepare them for their future educational and career pursuits within an increasingly global context. K–12 students will no longer have educational expectations placed upon them that are insufficient to meet the demands of a global economy in the 21st century. Successful implementation of the Common Core is a tremendous step forward for positioning the US among the most competitive countries.

Public support for the states and schools that adopt college and career readiness standards is a critical element of successful reform.

The adoption of internationally benchmarked college and career readiness standards represents a fundamental shift in expectations of students and school systems. While adopting such standards, like the Common Core, is essential, other critical steps remain—alignment of curriculum, instructional tools, teacher training and professional development, and assessments—to ensure that all students become college and career ready. As states implement the Common Core State Standards, educators and policymakers must also engage community stakeholders to broaden their understanding of why such standards are essential; what shifting to a college and career readiness standard means for students, parents, and schools; how these challenging expectations will change other aspects of schooling; and how individuals, groups, and communities can support implementation efforts.

This is a monumental moment in our nation’s educational history. But it will only be remarkable if we succeed in implementing the standards and prepare all students to be ready for college and career when they graduate from high school.

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