

Affirming the Goal:

Is College and Career Readiness an Internationally Competitive Standard?

Advance Brief for State Policymakers

According to MetLife's March 2011 Survey of the American Teacher: Preparing Students for College and Careers, approximately 93% of secondary school parents, 85% of secondary teachers, and 80% of business executives believe college and career readiness should be a priority in our nation's classrooms.

This college and career readiness priority is shared by many of our nation's governors and chief state school officers. Forty-four states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands have adopted the Common Core State Standards, a state-led initiative that identifies what knowledge and skills in English language arts and mathematics our students need to be successful in life after high school. ACT helped write those standards, and our definition of college and career readiness is the one on which the Common Core State Standards are based.

But do we know if ACT's—and thus every state that has adopted Common Core State Standards—definition of college and career readiness is not only the right goal, but also internationally competitive? Our newest policy research report, *Affirming the Goal: Is College and Career Readiness an Internationally Competitive Standard?*, attempts to answer this question. Below are key takeaways from the report

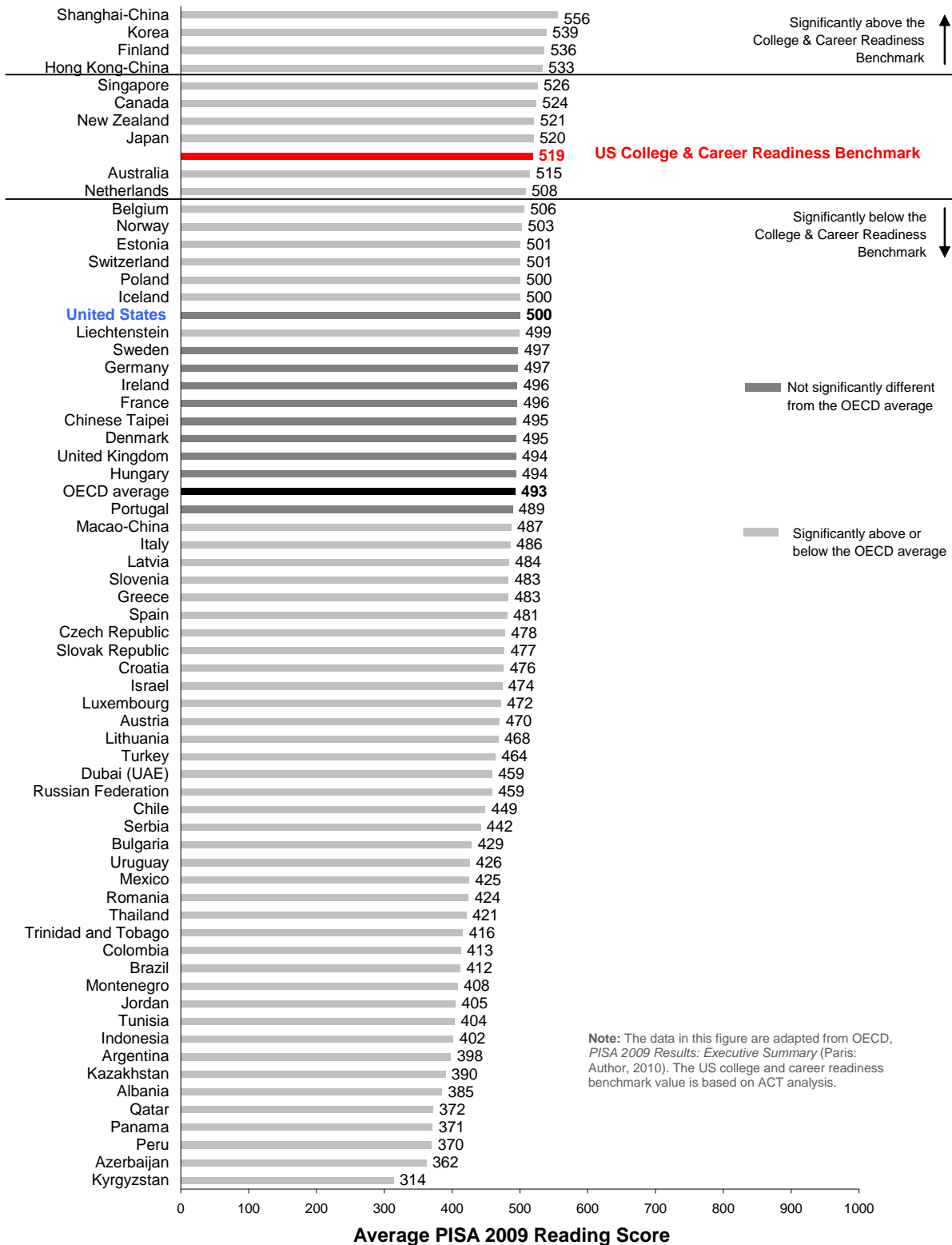
What does college and career readiness really mean?

ACT defines college and career readiness as the acquisition of the knowledge and skills a student needs to enroll and succeed in credit-bearing, first year courses at a postsecondary institution (i.e., two- or four- year colleges, trade or technical schools) without the need for remediation. The level of knowledge and skills needed for college readiness is comparable to that needed for workforce training programs for those jobs that offer salaries above the poverty line, are projected to grow in the future, and offer opportunities for advancement.

How do we know if our college and career readiness definition is internationally competitive?

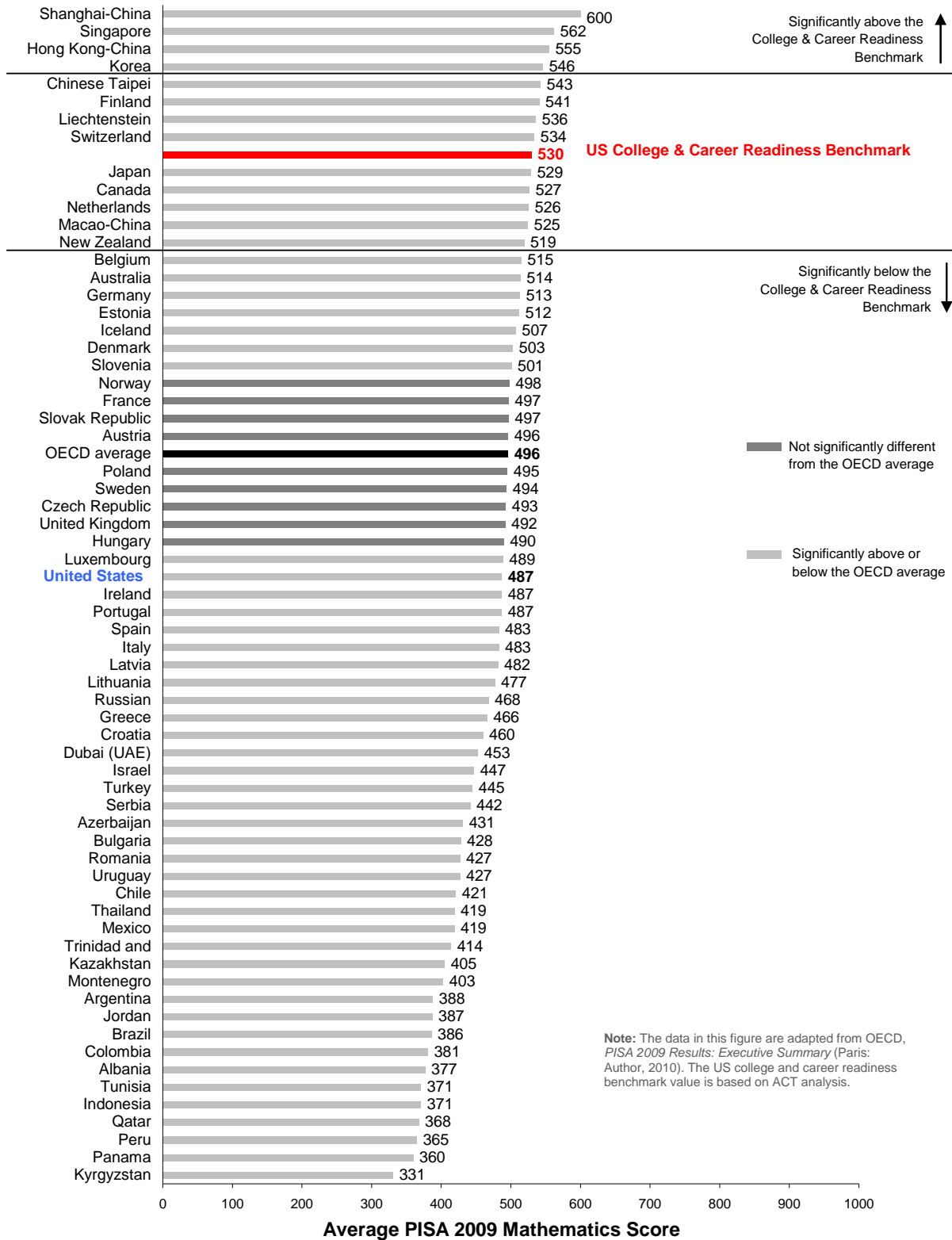
ACT conducted a comprehensive analysis of the assessment results of 2,248 US tenth-grade students from 77 high schools across the U.S. who took a special administration of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which is an international assessment for 15-year olds, and PLAN®, ACT's tenth-grade college and career readiness assessment. The analysis identified the PISA score equivalents to PLAN's college and career readiness benchmark scores in reading and math. From this, we determined if U.S. college and career readiness performance standards are internationally competitive by comparing them with the performance of the highest performing nations.

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.

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



They are indeed internationally competitive. In fact, our analysis affirmed: (1) the average scores of only four countries were significantly higher than our projected benchmark scores in reading and in mathematics; (2) 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; and (3) because our projected benchmark scores fell well within the average scores of the highest performing countries, college and career readiness is the right goal for US education. (See Figures 1 and 2)

How would the U.S. fare if college and career readiness standards were fully adopted and successfully implemented?

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the intergovernmental organization that sponsors the PISA assessment, average U.S. performance on PISA in 2009—as U.S. states implement their own disparate state education standards—was about the same as the OECD average in reading, but lagged behind the OECD average in math. Out of the 65 countries who participated in PISA 2009, average US performance fell below 14 countries in reading and 30 countries in math.

But if all states were to implement college and career readiness, using ACT's—and the Common Core State Standards Initiative's—definition, ACT estimates U.S. performance would then be among the top ten countries in the world in reading and in math. While this may not put the U.S. at the very top of the OECD list, it would be a substantial improvement and a critical step in the U.S. regaining lost ground in the globally competitive economy.

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