

Promising Practices of Exemplary High Schools: Increasing Students' College and Career Readiness

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Each year, ACT releases data on the most recent class of high school graduates. In addition to providing an objective and standardized measurement of readiness used in college admissions decisions, the data provided by the ACT® test can be used to inform states, districts, schools, teachers, parents, and students themselves about students' educational progress.¹ In particular, this information can be used by schools to provide students with targeted supports and resources that improve their knowledge, skills, and abilities as they prepare to navigate their postsecondary pathways.

To this end, alongside this year's release of graduating class data, ACT reached out to leaders at high schools with performance exceeding that of their peers and asked them to share practices they are implementing that they believe are having a positive impact on student achievement.² We sought practitioner perspectives from schools in different types of locations and with a broad range of populations. Some schools are located in cities, others in rural areas, and others in the suburbs. Many are serving a large percentage of students from traditionally underserved populations.³ All are public schools—a mix of charters and traditional neighborhood schools—with open admissions (or a lottery system). We are grateful to the responding schools for allowing ACT to share their promising practices more widely.⁴

Promising Practices

Increasing student motivation and engagement through career navigation

At Danville High School in Danville, Arkansas, students take career-focused courses each year with the goal of increasing students' motivation, showing them real-world examples of why education is important, and making sure that they have the tools they need to succeed. These courses cover college and career readiness, work readiness, and personal finance. The classes feature guest speakers from industry, the military, and college admissions, and the primary resources used include ACT Academy™, Naviance, and March2Success.



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Every Arkansas student is required to create a student success plan; at Danville High, these success plans include results from assessments and subsequent personal reflections related to personality, skills, interests, and career; grades; and academic test scores.⁵ Danville also requires students to reflect on their education to date and plan out which courses they should take in the future, giving students direction in their career planning.

Danville High needed buy-in from all stakeholders to create these courses, fit them in the schedule, hire career teachers, and ensure school counselors had the capacity to monitor and provide feedback on each student's success plan.

After implementing these practices, Danville has seen a dramatic increase in dual enrollment participation and in the number of students who enroll in postsecondary education after graduation—in 2019, roughly 80 percent of graduating seniors had committed to some type of postsecondary training, compared to 48 percent before the implementation of their college and career focus program. Students also have an average financial aid package of \$48,000. This is doubled from \$24,000 before the creation of these courses, which include FAFSA completion and scholarship applications.

Using the ACT as a lever to address content gaps and promote college conversations

Williams Preparatory School in Dallas, Texas, holds weekly intervention periods for each ACT subject area—four periods per week in total—that are coordinated by their Lead Interventionist. All first-years, sophomores, and juniors are grouped by their scores on the PreACT or MAP assessment, and teachers continuously model skills, beginning with foundational concepts in the content areas and continuing on to more focused ACT skills. The intervention teachers help students practice these transferable skills and assess students' progress. Students are given extensive feedback and the opportunity to work until they have mastered the concepts that are necessary for success both on the ACT and in their courses. They are also taught learning and testing strategies that are beneficial for their other courses. For juniors, an optional intensive group meets after school and on Saturdays for additional tutoring on the content of their courses and the ACT. These “full” participants, who participate not only in class but also in after-school tutoring in essential content areas and in Saturday ACT prep, have had, for previous graduating classes, the highest ACT score growth during their time at Danville High and—more importantly—the highest persistence rates after enrolling in college.

Williams Prep also visually tracks specific ACT questions students struggle with so that teachers can clearly see knowledge, process, and content gaps, enabling the delivery of targeted feedback to grow students' metacognition and academic autonomy. Their team of educators works collaboratively to identify questions where students across the school are struggling so that these gaps in essential skills can be addressed throughout the curriculum, including in International Baccalaureate (IB) instruction.

Their school serves a population of students where a majority come from low-income families and are among the first in their families to attend college. According to the staff

at Williams Prep, many parents do not have experience with the American education system, so staff members meet with parents each semester to discuss their student's potential college options based on their current level of readiness and how parents can support their students in broadening their options. The school raised funds in order to hire tutors and created the Student Instructional Leadership Team (SILT), where high-achieving students tutor their peers. The school also addresses gaps in teacher training through professional development sessions, conducted by the Lead Interventionist and the Academic Counselor, designed to give teachers the pedagogical content and content knowledge they need to best serve their students.

College-level coursework and college and career navigation for all students

Harding Charter Preparatory High School (HCPHS) in Oklahoma City was founded around the premise that providing students with an academically challenging educational experience in high school would prepare them for success at any four-year university. All students are required to take at least five Advanced Placement (AP) courses before graduation, and to staff these courses, the school seeks out highly qualified educators and provides them with continuous professional development. In order to ensure that all students are prepared for success in college-level coursework, HCPHS provides tutoring programs and an Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) support curriculum in every classroom. All students take Senior Capstone, a course that gives them the resources to research postsecondary opportunities, apply for scholarships, and learn about potential career fields. Their most recent graduating class had a 100 percent acceptance rate into postsecondary education, and 69 percent of seniors graduated with college credit.

Reading and writing their way to college and career readiness

Doral Academy Charter School in Doral, Florida, has implemented a Writing/Reading Action Plan (WRAP) across the school. Throughout grades 6–12, there is a sustained focus on reviewing the elements of grammar, acquiring and practicing vocabulary, and writing short and extended responses to passages of different lengths. Students receive “bellringer” practice ACT questions at the start of English class, with the assignments varying in topic and length to address essential skills such as grammar, close reading, and writing both short and extended responses. Teachers review these assignments in each class to ensure all students understand the material.

The school's College Assistance Program (CAP) Advisor works to expose students to the multiple postsecondary pathways available to them. To empower students to take responsibility for their futures, the school also offers a writing workshop, which assists students in developing their college admissions essays and researching future careers.

Doral Academy has seen slow but steady growth on ACT and AP tests, as well as growing enthusiasm and dedication that reflect the readiness for college and career felt by the student body.

Integrating tutoring to ensure all students acquire essential content knowledge

North Vermilion High School in Maurice, Louisiana, has taken a multi-pronged approach to ACT preparation. Students take the PreACT as sophomores, and teachers help the students interpret their results so that they understand the specific skills where they may need additional practice. The school has a daily 22-minute “intervention period,” in which students can participate in tutoring or enrichment activities or use the time to study. In addition to ensuring that all students have personalized support on topics and skills where they may be struggling, juniors and seniors spend several of these periods throughout the year focusing on each of the four subjects tested on the ACT, with teachers concentrating instruction on the particular skills most important to student success in that subject using practice ACT tests and questions.

The schoolwide Accelerated Reader program ensures that students read on a regular basis, which North Vermilion believes has positively impacted their reading scores. English III teachers also cover English and reading test questions on a weekly basis.

What practices have these schools implemented in response to the pandemic?

Danville High is discussing the pandemic’s implications on the job market, reviewing “recession-proof” career paths with its seniors, and ensuring that students who have suffered changes in their financial situation or have otherwise been impacted by the pandemic have support if they need to change their postsecondary plans. The school has found that having four years of career classes has prepared students with a backup plan, so they were better situated to weather the changes the pandemic has wrought in their lives. There were still graduates in the class of 2020 who needed to rethink their plans, so school counselors and career teachers prioritized counseling those students over the spring and summer. Some students needed assistance updating their FAFSA to reflect changes in family income, while other students had their plans to begin a job or apprenticeship upended and needed assistance to use their Pell Grant funds to enter a career program at the local community college. In response to growing interest in joining the US military, Danville High brought in recruiters at the end of the spring semester to enable this pathway.

In response to the ACT test cancellations caused by the pandemic, Williams Prep created a summer prep course to make sure their students could keep their knowledge sharp. Teachers were available over the summer to answer questions, provide instruction and advice, and encourage students who were concerned about their academic futures.

What advice do the schools have for other educators?

“My strong belief is that rigorous, sustained grammar and writing practice, underpinned by short and extended readings of fiction and non-fiction texts across grade levels is the most effective way to build and develop communication skills.”

Domingo Montenegro, Language Arts Department Chair, Doral Academy Charter School

“The number one priority of a high school should be to prepare kids for life after graduation. Don’t skimp on the career planning, it will make all the difference in your school and student success.”

Jennifer Richardson, School Counselor, Danville High School

“As a teacher, you are expected to play a lot of different roles: a counselor, a friend, a mother figure for students, and many teachers believe that is the way to get students to buy into their instruction. But instructors have to remember that this alone will not increase student buy-in. Students in high school are increasingly aware of the disparities in the education system, and they will invest the most time into mastering content in courses that bridge those gaps.

“Educators also need to develop the ability to see beyond their students’ initial academic data. This vision will transfer to their students who often have the false perception that they are less capable because of their zip code or ethnicity.”

Grecia Martinez, Co-Lead Interventionist, Williams Preparatory School

“All students are capable of being successful in a rigorous curriculum as long as the classroom follows equitable practices.”

Steven Stefanick, Superintendent/Principal, Harding Charter Preparatory High School

“I have found that it is really helpful when students can see a list of the specific skills that they didn’t test well on and then they get to focus their time on that. One year, we had juniors take a practice ACT and they had to take their answer documents and write out how many questions they missed for each skill. For many it was an eye-opener because sometimes students focus on a skill that either wasn’t tested much, or they didn’t realize the importance of a specific skill.”

Ann Krauss, School Counselor, North Vermilion High School

“Let the data do the talking, adjust as necessary, be flexible, and always look for new ways to educate.”

Steven Edlin, Principal, Ingleside High School

Conclusion

Educators across the country are trying to give their students the greatest opportunities possible with limited resources and many challenges. Data and practice have shown that it is essential to set high expectations that students take rigorous coursework, paired with the level of support and types of interventions students need to be successful.⁶ These exemplary schools are using data to inform instruction, provide targeted feedback and support, and ensure that their students graduate high school with the knowledge and skills necessary for postsecondary success. They work with not only students but families to help their students thrive through successful navigation of their postsecondary options. ACT hopes that these examples highlight hard-working schools and prove useful to schools and districts seeking new approaches to college and career readiness.

ACT will continue to research practices that help ensure all students are ready for college and career.⁷ Every student should have access to the preparation needed for postsecondary success—in content knowledge and planning for college and career—and we applaud the schools featured here for their work to ensure equitable opportunities for their students to succeed after graduating from high school.

Notes

1. Jeff Allen and Justine Radunzel, *What are the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks?* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2017), <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/pdfs/R1670-college-readiness-benchmarks-2017-11.pdf>.
2. These schools' average ACT scores exceeded their peers by at least two standard deviations. To identify peer schools, schools were grouped by the number of ACT-tested seniors, the percentage of students who self-identified as members of populations traditionally underserved in education, the percentage of students testing on a National (i.e., weekend) test date, the percent of students taking the ACT more than once, and the location of the school (i.e., rural, urban, suburban/town). Schools with big shifts in N counts from 2019 to 2020 or N counts under 50 were not considered. From this list, outreach was conducted to ensure diversity in location and student populations, among other factors.
3. ACT identifies underserved learners using student characteristics that are often related to a lack of access to high-quality educational and career planning opportunities and resources. Specifically, this definition encompasses students who have at least one of the following characteristics:
 - Traditionally underserved minority: race/ethnicity is African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, Hispanic/Latino, or Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander.
 - Low income: combined parental income is less than or equal to \$36,000.
 - First generation in college: highest parental education level is high school diploma or less.

4. ACT has not established a causal link between the implementation of these practices and ACT scores and does not necessarily endorse these practices as guaranteeing improved average test scores.
5. For more on career readiness in Arkansas, see Jeffrey T. Steedle and Ray Girdler, *Promoting Career Readiness in Arkansas High Schools* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2020), <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/R1792-arkansas-hs-workkeys-2020-01.pdf>.
6. ACT, *Rigor at Risk: Reaffirming Quality in the High School Core Curriculum* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2007), https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/rigor_report.pdf; Clifford Adelman, *Answers in the Tool Box: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelor's Degree Attainment* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1999), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED431363>.
7. J. Scott Payne, Sweet Z. San Pedro, Rael Moore, and Edgar I. Sanchez, *Educator Perspectives: Insights on Test Preparation in Schools with State and District Testing* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2020), <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/R1806-ed-test-prep-insights-2020-05.pdf>; Steedle and Girdler, *Promoting Career Readiness*.

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