



# ISBE Performance Level Alignment and ACT Cut Scores

# Illinois' students are nationally recognized for their academic achievements.

U.S. News & World Report

**Fourth in the nation** for Pre-K-12 education

CNBC

**"A" & Third in the nation** for Education

Illinois Report Card

Graduation rate in 2024 reached an **all-time high** at 87.7%

**Above the national average** in eighth grade reading and math

NAEP

Held steady across all subjects and grades from 2022 to 2024

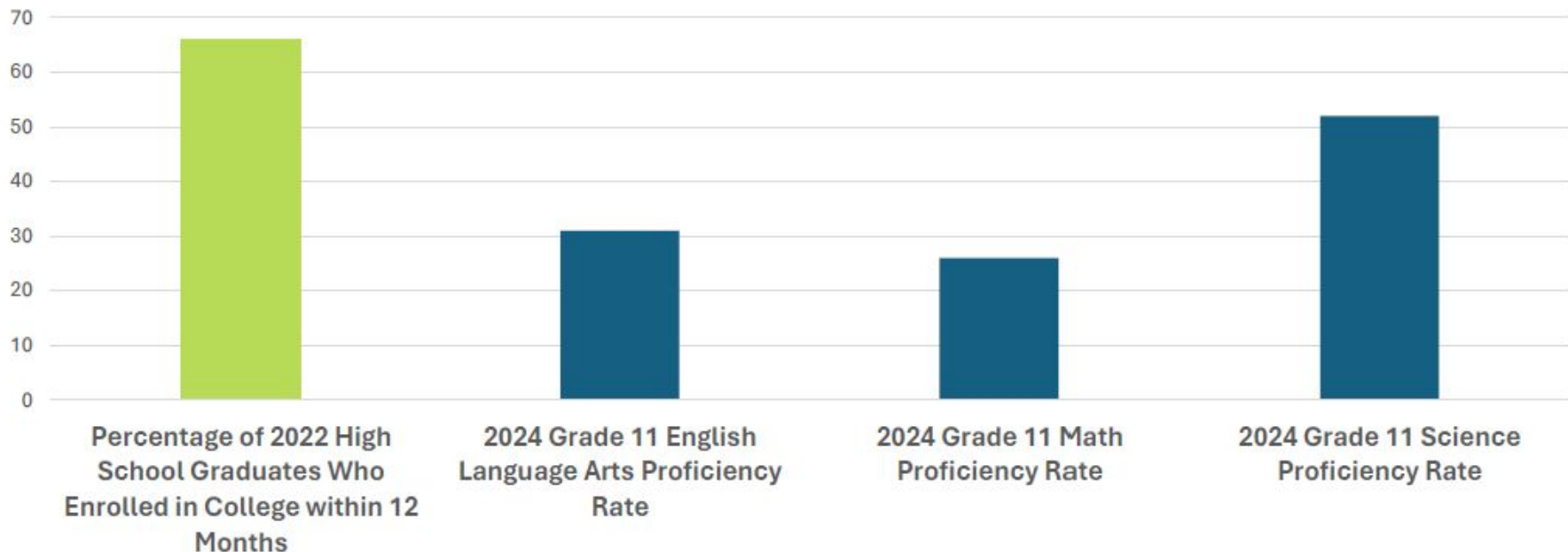
NAEP

Among **top five states** in multiple Advanced Placement metrics

College Board



# Proficiency rates have not reflected college readiness, enrollment and success.



# Key Definitions

## Performance Levels

Are the score ranges that divide the full spectrum of performance on the state assessment into categories.

The State decides how many levels there are, the **cut scores** that divide each level, and which levels qualify as “proficient.”

## Proficiency

Being proficient means that a student is on track in their learning.

The proficiency benchmark is the score a student needs to reach on a state assessment to be considered on track for their grade level.



## What Proficiency Data Impacts

- **Individual Score Reports** families receive with their students' assessment results
- Aggregate reporting for schools, districts, and the state on the **Illinois Report Card**
- School **accountability** designations
- Identifying students for **acceleration** (Accelerated Placement Act)

What  
Proficiency  
Data **Does Not**  
**Impact**

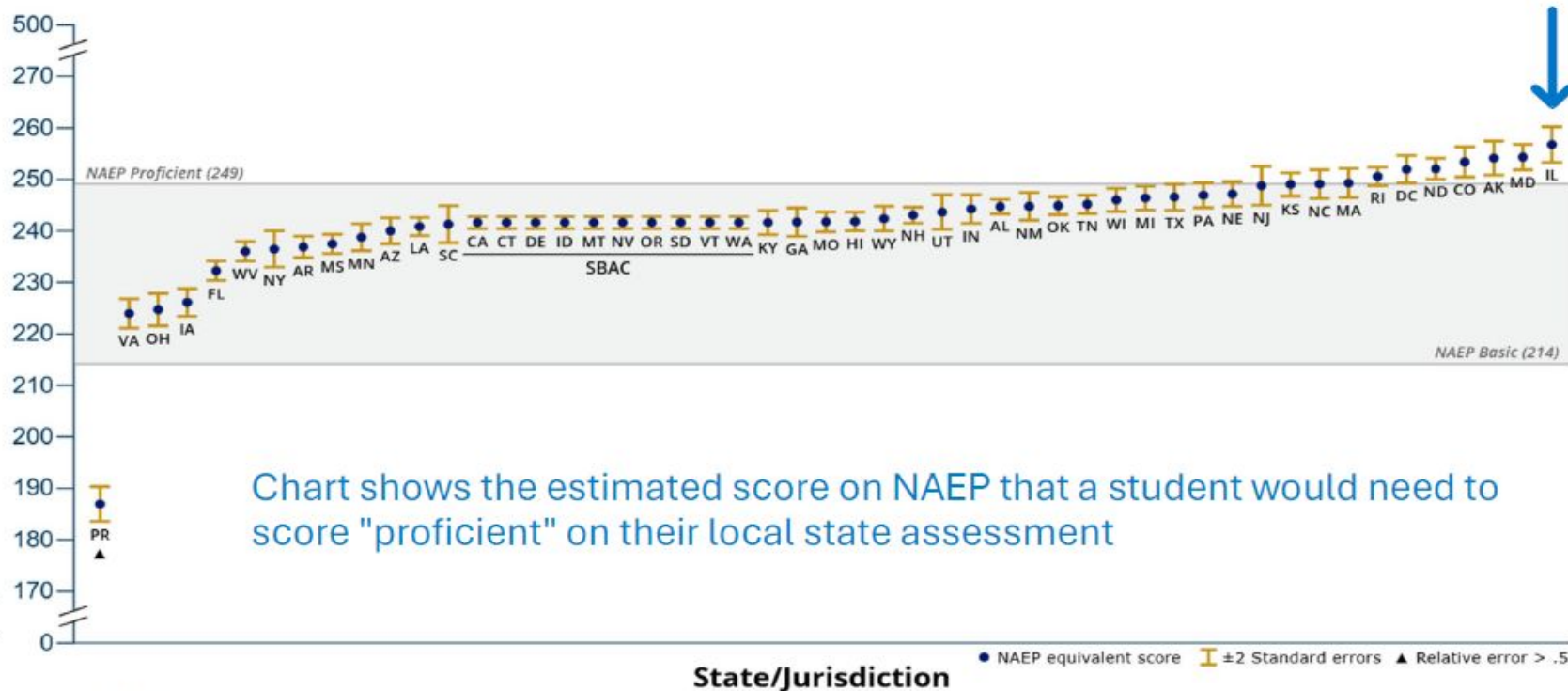
- State funding
- Teacher evaluations
- Grade promotion and graduation
- Student eligibility for an individualized education plan (IEP)
- Score reports students choose to send to colleges
- Illinois Learning Standards (what schools teach/expectations for learning)
- Assessments themselves (format/content/length)

# Restrictive Illinois' Benchmarks

- Illinois' benchmarks for English language arts proficiency were the most restrictive in the country, resulting in the mislabeling of high-achieving, college-ready students as “not proficient.”
  - In 4th grade math, Illinois had the most difficult-to-reach proficiency benchmark in the nation, according to the National Assessment for Educational Progress.
  - For every other grade and subject, our proficiency benchmarks ranked among the top four most restrictive.
- When ISBE adopted the SAT as the state's high school assessment in 2017, the benchmarks for proficiency were set 60 points higher in English language arts and 10 points higher in math than the College Board's own research-informed national college readiness benchmarks.
  - This meant that students who were succeeding in school—passing Advanced Placement and dual credit courses, taking on leadership roles, and enrolling in college—were often still labeled “not proficient” on the state assessment.
- In science, the challenge was reversed—the benchmark was too low, overstating student mastery. This also led to confusion and inflated results that didn't align with classroom performance or readiness expectations.

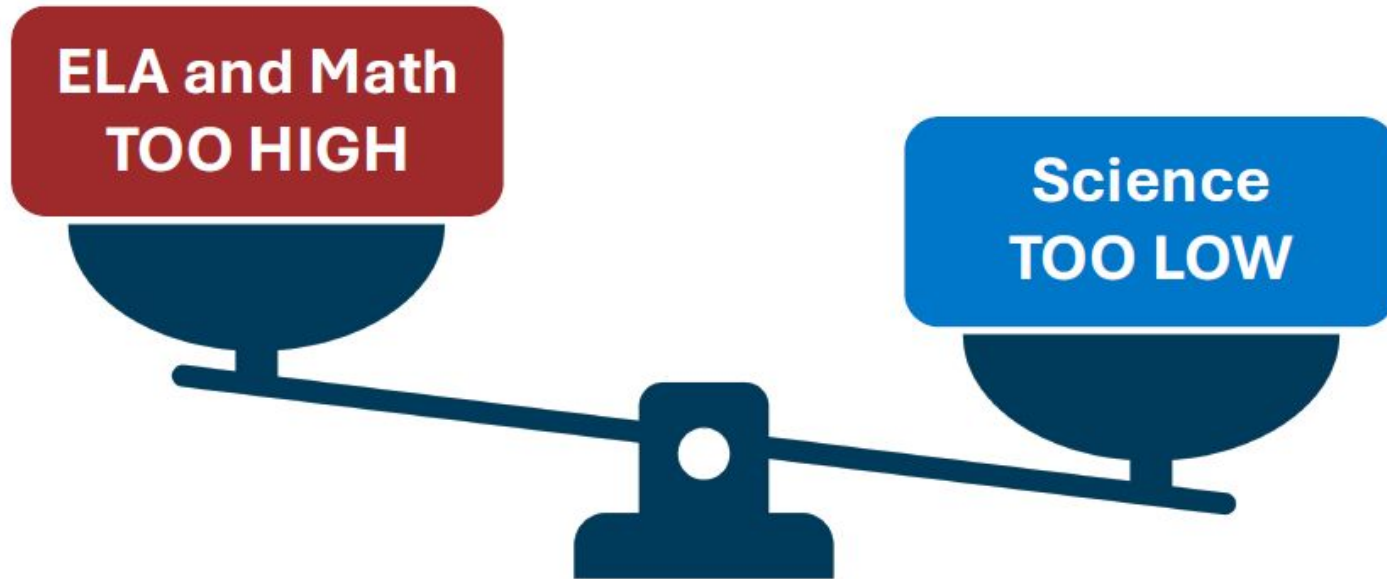


# Illinois had the most restrictive benchmarks for ELA and math proficiency.





**Performance levels did not match  
classroom realities.**



# Levels had no alignment between tests, grade levels, or college and career expectations.

IA*	Does Not Meet	Partially Meets	Approaching Meets	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
ISA	Emerging	Developing	Proficient	Exemplary	
SAT*	Partially Meets	Approaching Meets	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations	

\*Previous high school assessment – new levels will apply to new high school assessment (ACT)



## **ISBE launched an 18-month, deliberate, and transparent process to right-size performance levels.**

- 1** Launched in March 2024
- 2** Presented at 12+ education conferences and regional convenings
- 3** Statewide listening tour with nine in-person stops, attended by hundreds of educators & stakeholders
- 4** Sought the feedback of student leaders, postsecondary voices, and community members
- 5** Provided regular public updates throughout





## Process led by educators and validated by experts

- 1 Policy leaders determined the number of performance levels and gave guidance on how to recognize “right-sized.”
- 2 100+ educators and content specialists created **performance level descriptors** (rubrics that describe the range of performance via the standards within each performance level).
- 3 147 teachers evaluated the difficulty of items from the most recent test to recommend cut scores for each performance level.
- 4 Entire process guided by the Technical Advisory Committee and monitored by experts from Center for Assessment.
- 5 State Board of Education voted to approve new levels on Aug. 13.



## Goal:

### Alignment with College and Career Expectations

Changes aligned ACT proficiency benchmark  
to the score a student needs to  
**get into college**

#### English language arts

- 18 to place into English Composition I (Eastern Illinois University)
- 19 to earn scholarship (Harper Community College)
- 23 for exemption from writing placement test (Loyola University)

#### Math

- 17 for Intermediate Algebra (Eastern)
- 20 for College Algebra (Eastern)
- 22 for scholarship (Harper)
- 26-27 for Calculus (Loyola, Eastern)



## Goal:

### Alignment with College and Career Expectations

Changes aligned ACT proficiency benchmark to the score a student needs to **pass college coursework**

#### English language arts score of 18

- A probability: 14%
- B or higher probability: 43%
- C or higher probability: 71%

#### Math score of 19

- A probability: 11%
- B or higher probability: 35%
- C or higher probability: 63%

#### Science score of 19

- A probability: 8%
- B or higher probability: 31%
- C or higher probability: 65%



Changes aligned ACT proficiency benchmark to the score a student needs to **succeed in the workforce**

## Goal:

### Alignment with College and Career Expectations

#### Career readiness

- Students with scores in the 17-19 range on ACT are more likely to earn a Silver level National Career Readiness Certificate (ACT WorkKeys), indicating that they possess the essential work skills needed for success in many jobs across industries and occupations.



PRODUCTION  
& INDUSTRY



HEALTHCARE  
SUPPORT



SKILLED  
TRADES



TECHNICAL  
SERVICES

# New Unified Performance Levels

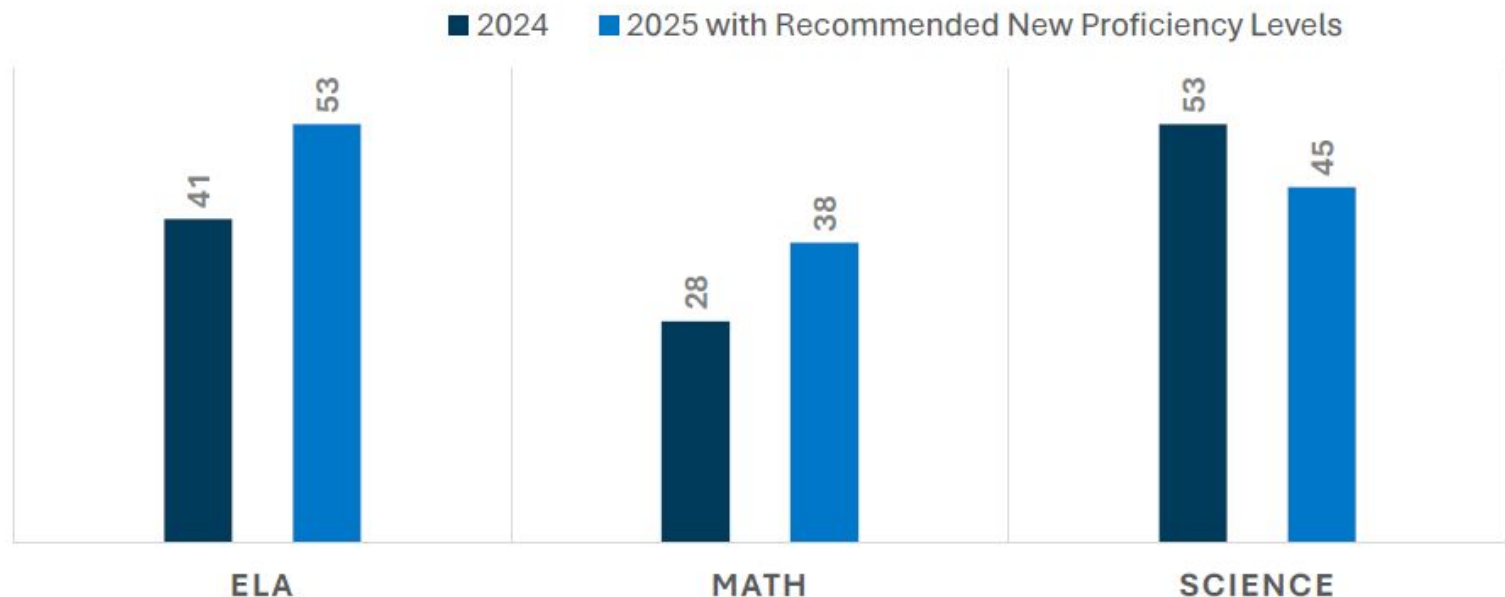
IAR	Below Proficient	Approaching Proficient	Proficient	Above Proficient
ISA	Below Proficient	Approaching Proficient	Proficient	Above Proficient
ACT	Below Proficient	Approaching Proficient	Proficient	Above Proficient

# Reminder: Former Misaligned Performance Levels

IAR	Does Not Meet	Partially Meets	Approaching Meets	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
ISA	Emerging	Developing	Proficient	Exemplary	
SAT	Partially Meets	Approaching Meets	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations	

# A Truer Picture of Student Performance

## RATES OF PROFICIENCY BY SUBJECT IN 2024 VS 2025 WITH THE RECOMMENDED NEW PROFICIENCY LEVELS



Note: 2025 data is preliminary and will not match report card calculations.



# Key Outcomes Achieved

## College and Career Readiness Integration

- ACT benchmarks directly linked to post-secondary success data
- Better preparation signals for students and families

## Coherence Across Assessments

- Consistent 4-level system eliminates confusion
- Aligned expectations from elementary through high school

## Educator-Driven Process

- 250+ Illinois educators made all recommendations
- Content expertise combined with real-world classroom experience

## Rigorous Methodology

- Established psychometric procedures followed
- Independent oversight confirmed process integrity





## Key Takeaways

- Illinois' education system leads the nation, but proficiency data did not reflect actual student performance.
- Misaligned proficiency benchmarks sent the wrong message to students – leading to students missing out on opportunities for acceleration and students who were college-ready being told they were not.
- The new, unified performance levels align to college and career readiness expectations.
- ISBE proceeded transparently and followed an 18-month, research-based process, led by educators and validated by external experts.
- We maintain our ability to track progress over time through the Student Growth Percentile.





# ISBE's ACT Cut Scores

# New Cut Scores: ACT ELA, Math, Science

Grade 9 (PreACT 9 Secure) Scale 1-32

Grade 10 (PreACT Secure) Scale 1-35

Grade 11 (ACT with Writing) Scale 1-36

Grade Level	Approaching Proficient			Proficient			Above Proficient		
	ELA	Math	Science	ELA	Math	Science	ELA	Math	Science
9	11	15	11	14	17	14	25	24	25
10	12	15	11	15	18	16	26	25	25
11	13	15	14	18	19	19	27	28	27

**Note:** Illinois' high school assessment changed from SAT to ACT in spring 2025, so there are no prior cuts to compare.

