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Aspire in Arkansas?


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Summary Points

- Gov. Hutchinson's request to do away with PARCC was vetoed by the State Board of Education.
- Arkansas' contract with PARCC expired June 30th.
- Gov. Hutchinson has recommended using ACT/Aspire instead of PARCC.
- Switching to ACT/Aspire could benefit students, but whether or not it will eliminate the issues some had with PARCC is unclear.
- ACT Aspire is a vendor created test that tests students in four subject areas.
- ACT Aspire will take less time to administer than PARCC.
- There has been no study conducted to determine the alignment between ACT Aspire and Common Core State Standards.

NAEP scores from 2013 were used to predict what Arkansas' ACT Aspire results might be.

Aspire in Arkansas?

On June 22, 2015, Governor Hutchinson communicated with Johnny Key, State Commissioner of Education, his request for the state's removal from PARCC by June 30th. This back and forth over student assessment has raised many questions for educators, students, and parents. This brief will review the history behind annual assessments, address the differences between PARCC and ACT/ACT Aspire, and suggest the scores Arkansas' students would receive if ACT Aspire is administered next school year.

Testing Showdown

June 30th, 2015, marked the end of Arkansas' contract with the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). Governor Hutchinson sparked controversy by requesting that the state of Arkansas eliminate PARCC and instead use ACT's new assessment for grades 3-8 and early high school, ACT Aspire. The recommendation was initiated by the Governor's Council on Common Core Review, chaired by Lt. Governor Tim Griffin.

Throughout the spring, the Council met to review the Common Core Standards and the associated assessment. On May 13th, 2015 the Council heard from representatives from PARCC and four other testing companies: Questar Assessments, Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA), Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), and Iowa Test of Basic Skills. On June 8th, 2015, Gov. Hutchinson communicated with Education Commissioner, Johnny Key, and recommended to Key that the state discontinue using PARCC and begin using the ACT and ACT Aspire as the state assessment for the 2015-16 school year.¹ On June 11th, 2015, the recommendation was taken to the State Board of Education, who has the responsibility of determining state assessments. The State Board of

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Education rejected Governor Hutchinson's request to switch to ACT Aspire.² In response to this rejection, some members of the Arkansas Legislative Council are seeking to overturn the Arkansas State Board of Education's decision; however, the Council does not possess the power to force the Arkansas Department of Education to cosign with Governor Hutchinson's request of using ACT Aspire.

Standardized Testing: How Did We Get Here?

Mandatory annual exams in literacy and mathematics, such as Arkansas' Benchmark and End of Course (EOC), are a result of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. Passed under the George W. Bush Administration, NCLB was a renovation of Lyndon B. Johnson's 1965 Elementary and Secondary Act, and required standardized testing for students in grades 3-8 and one time in high school. Accountability systems based on the results of the exams had implications for school's finances and reputation.

States developed and administered assessments to measure student performance on their unique standards, preventing a consistent national measurement of students' academic progress.³ By 2009, governors and education commissioners from 48 states, two territories, and the District of Columbia had recognized a need for greater consistency between states' standards and assessments and began the process of developing the Common Core State Standards.⁴

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for the state of Arkansas were adopted by the

Arkansas State Board of Education on July 12th, 2010. The implementation of the new standards was phased in stages over three years: Kindergarten through second grade implemented CCSS in 2011-12, third grade through eighth grade implemented 2012-13, and ninth through twelfth grade implemented in 2013-14.

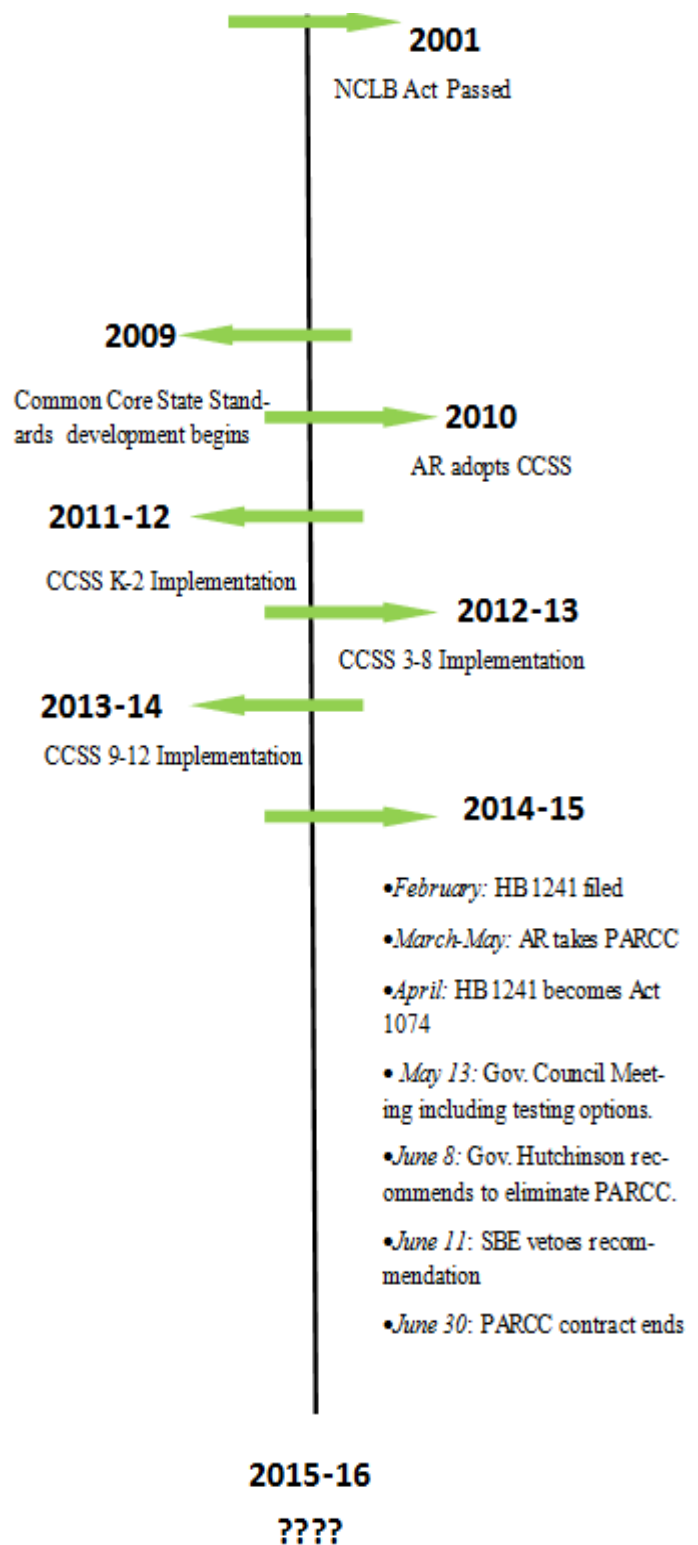
Each implementation consisted of the Arkansas Department of Education providing professional development for CCSS; the standards' full implementation in the state was carried out during the 2013-14 academic school year. As CCSS were being implemented in classrooms, students continued to be assessed on the Arkansas Benchmark Assessment, which measured performance based on the prior standards, in part because there was not yet an assessment that measured performance on the new standards.

PARCC was awarded one of two contracts to develop an assessment to measure student achievement of the CCSS. Arkansas serves as one of the governing states for PARCC and contributed to the tests' overall development over the past five years.⁵ Arkansas students were scheduled to take the PARCC for the first time during the 2014-15 school year. Right before testing time, however, a bill was filed (HB 1241) in Arkansas' State Senate to delay the PARCC Assessment until the 2017-18 school year. Modifications were made, allowing PARCC to be administered during the 2014-15 school year, limiting the state from entering into any future contract with PARCC for more than one year and enabling the State Board of Education to take into consideration any recommendations that are made by the Governor's Council on Common Core Review related to statewide assessments for public school students for the 2016-17 school year.⁶ On April 6th, 2015, the House approved the bill, meaning HB 1241 became Act 1074 (Arkansas).⁷

Changing the Assessment?

If Arkansas' education agencies worked in solidarity for PARCC, why the push for ACT and ACT Aspire? Governor Hutchinson's request to cancel the contract with PARCC may reflect a public concern that there is something "wrong" with the PARCC assessment. Many parents, teachers, and community members openly disapprove of Common Core, claiming that it reduces teacher and student creativity to focus solely on the test's tested skills and that it's too much rigor too quickly. Many disapproved of PARCC as well; some parents have opted their children out of the test. The reasons for this disapproval are various and include: viewed as high risk (meaning teachers are given harsh evaluations predominately contingent upon students' scores), consists of too much federal government involvement, more expensive compared to other tests, too time consuming (which takes away from instruction time), appeared secretive because little was known about the test prior to test time, and a lack of practicality. It is clear that ACT/Aspire would require less time to administer than PARCC, leaving more time for student instruction. According to the *Washington Post*, "PARCC's newly released guidance to schools calls for: 9¾ hours testing time for third grade, 10 hours for grades 4-5, 10¾ hours for grades

Figure 1. Timeline of key points in Arkansas assessment.



6-8 and 11 to 11¼ hours for grades 9-12.”⁸ Aspire will take grades 3-10 approximately 4 hours.⁹ In addition, proponents of ACT/Aspire suggest it is a more practical test for students because students will be more invested. Also, because ACT/Aspire is a vendor-created exam, the “government interference” will minimize. There is no guarantee that ACT/Aspire will not possess some of the same concerns as PARCC.¹⁰

What is ACT Aspire?

Governor Hutchinson has been persistent on Arkansas replacing PARCC with ACT/Aspire. The ACT Aspire is a derivative of a well-known and trusted college entrance exam, the ACT. In 2014 approximately ninety-three percent (27,000) of Arkansas’ high school seniors completed the ACT.¹¹ Sixty-three percent of the 2014 ACT tested seniors met the English Benchmark, while only forty-one percent met the Reading Benchmark; thirty-five percent of the 2014 seniors met the Mathematics Benchmark, and only thirty-two percent met the Science Benchmark. Only twenty-one percent of Arkansas students met ACT’s College and Career Readiness Benchmark scores in all four subjects: English, reading, science, and math.¹² ACT data indicates that while most students intend to continue on to college, many do not, and those that do may not be ready for the academic expectations they will encounter. Nationally, eighty-seven percent of the 2013 ACT tested graduates planned to matriculate in to college; however, only sixty-nine percent enrolled in a postsecondary institution in fall 2013. This means over 300,000 students did not attain their goal of entering college, an alarming gap to consider. The conclusions drawn from ACT’s data thus inspired the development of ACT Aspire.

Launched in 2014, ACT Aspire’s goal is to link elementary and secondary progression within the college preparation framework. The assessment’s results convey how ready students are for college or their career, allowing teachers to determine early in a student’s education which academic areas need growth to ensure the student is ready for success in college and careers.¹³ In addition, because it is linked to the ACT, the ACT Aspire could be a more practical assessment for students than the PARCC since colleges already accept and acknowledge the ACT. ACT Aspire can be completed more quickly by students than many other assessments, including the PARCC, and can also be deemed more versatile for students because it covers science. These are perhaps the reasons Alabama, South Carolina, and Wisconsin have implemented the ACT Aspire program in their schools. Despite these positive implications, ACT Aspire does raise some concern regarding consistent data, common core alignment, and teacher-student readiness.

ACT Aspire’s Possible Implications

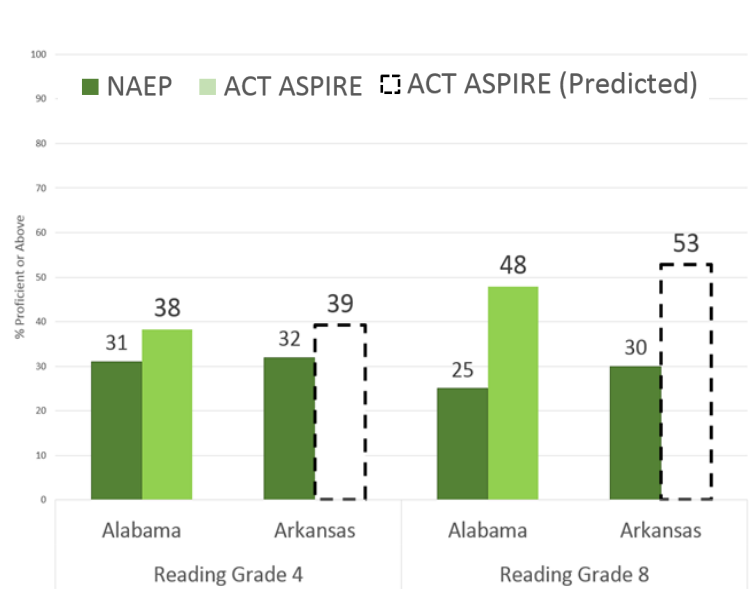
The PARCC assessment was developed specifically to assess CCSS, so it congruently aligns with the Common Core State Standards.¹⁴ There has been no study conducted, however, to determine the alignment between ACT Aspire and Common Core State Standards. The makers of ACT Aspire indicate reporting categories are based on the ACT College Readiness Standards and aligned to the Common Core State Standards.¹⁵

Arkansas teachers from all over the state had a role in the creation of the state’s PARCC assessment. Just as reiteration, the ACT/Aspire is a vendor constructed exam, which means unlike the PARCC, teachers do not have any input regarding what skills are being tested, how these skills are being tested, or how these skills are scored. ACT Aspire will test students on more content than the PARCC did, but its approach is not reflective of Arkansas’s curriculum. ACT Aspire’s integrated math content on its exam does not mirror Arkansas’s “one math per year” structure. While an Arkansas student may have taken only Algebra I, ACT Aspire’s Early High School assessment will be testing that student on Algebra I, Geometry, and Calculus. The lack of verified alignment to Arkansas’ CCSS, lack of teacher input into the development of the assessment, and lack of alignment with Arkansas’ curriculum progression for secondary mathematics puts teachers in a difficult position when determining how to best prepare their students for success on the ACT Aspire.

How Would Arkansas Students Perform on ACT Aspire?

Alabama is the only state that has given the ACT Aspire in grades 3-8. Alabama’s results provide a clue of how Arkansas’ students might score on the ACT Aspire because Arkansas and Alabama students both participated in the 2013 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). NAEP is a national student progress assessment of reading, math and science skills-given to a sample of students from every state every other year with students in grades 4 and 8. The most recent test scores (2013) indicate that Arkansas’ and Alabama’s NAEP state percentages of students scoring proficient or better in each subject were similar in fourth grade Reading, with Arkansas at thirty-two percent Reading Proficiency and Alabama at thirty-one percent Reading Proficiency. Students scored similarly in NAEP Reading; however, in math, Arkansas students scored higher. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the relationship between Alabama’s NAEP and Aspire scores as well as Arkansas’ NAEP and possible Aspire scores.

Figure 2. NAEP (2013) and ACT Aspire (2013-14) Reading Percent Proficient . Note: Arkansas’ ACT Aspire Scores are predicted.



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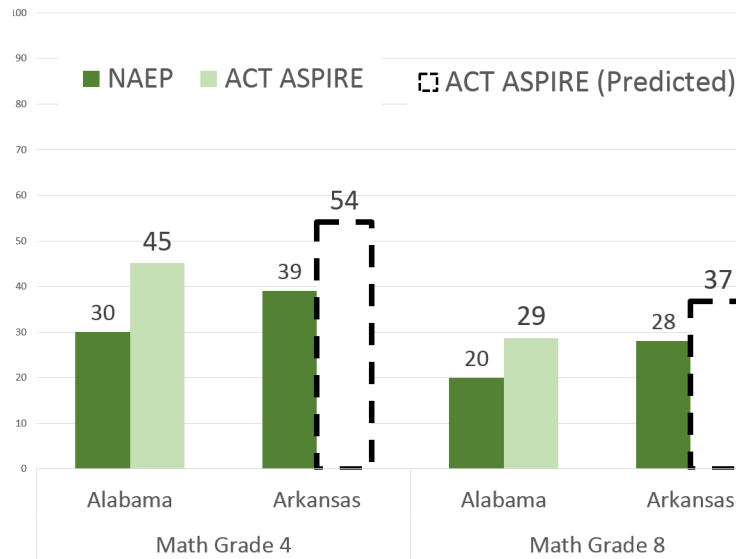
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Figure 3. NAEP (2013) and ACT Aspire (2013-14) Math Percent Proficient. Note: Arkansas' ACT Aspire Scores are predicted.



Conclusion

The 2015-16 school year will be the third consecutive year where students are assessed on a different test. The frequent switch of state test selections minimizes the effective data on Arkansas students due to the lack of consistency on the content being assessed and how these skills are being measured. Lack of consistent data can make it difficult for teachers to intervene with students who are struggling academically because schools will not know how to effectively interpret the results to identify students' academic needs. Arkansas must be careful and select an exam that best supports our students to be thoroughly prepared for college and careers.

The switch from PARCC to ACT/Aspire may be positive for Arkansas' students. Benefits may include less instructional time being used for testing and students being (more) prepared for a test that is important to colleges. Despite these benefits, it is unclear whether or not ACT/Aspire will eliminate concerns raised by PARCC opponents. The reality is, standardized testing is not going anywhere, and if states want to continue receiving Title I money, they will continue to take these exams. The goal, however, should be selecting an exam that is most conducive to our students' learning and their futures. Hopefully, whichever assessment is selected meets that goal.

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