

Right-Sizing Illinois' Proficiency Benchmarks

Giving families, teachers, and students more accurate data about student performance

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State Superintendent of Education

The Problem

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

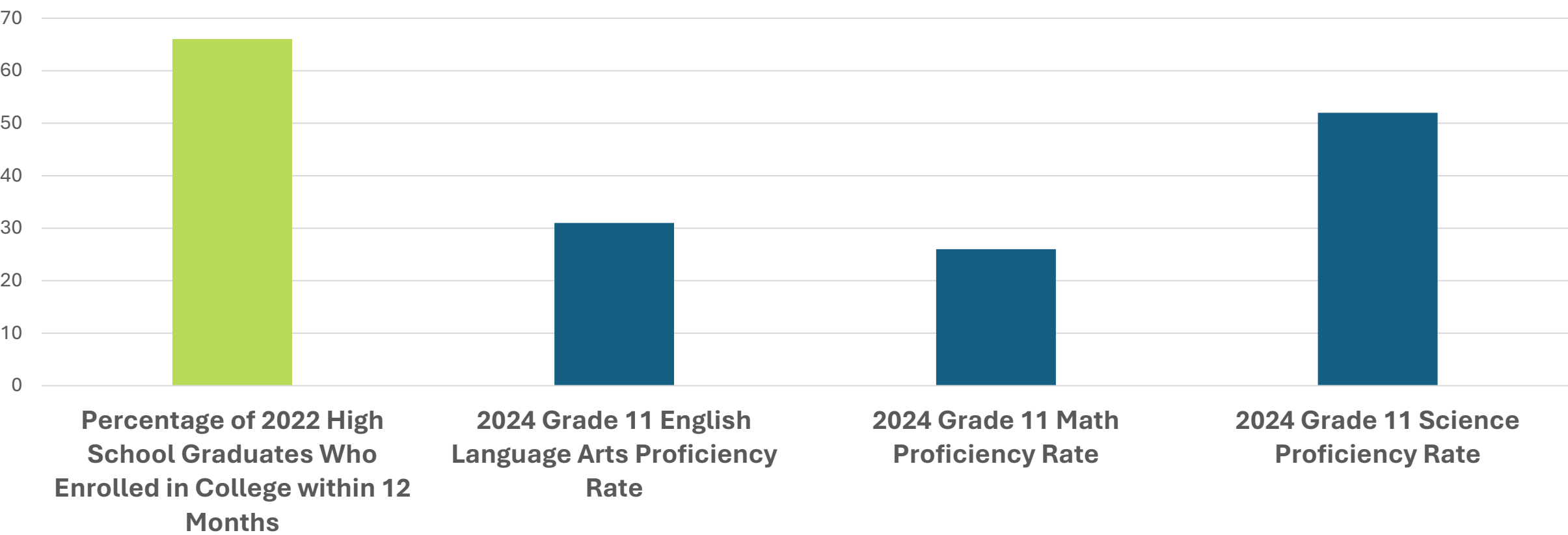
Held steady across all subjects and grades from 2022 to 2024

NAEP

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

College Board

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



Let's clarify...

Key Definitions

Performance Levels

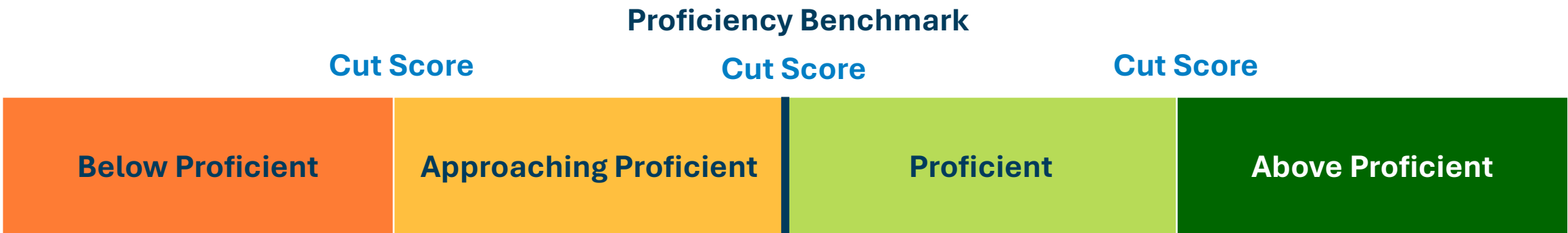
Are the score ranges that divide the full spectrum of performance on the state assessment into categories.

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.



Why Performance Levels Matter

ISBE

To identify schools for additional support and track progress in proficiency over time.

Schools

To improve teaching and learning for all students.

Families

To understand how a student is doing.

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)

Misalignment had serious, real-world consequences.

Illinois' misaligned performance levels **mislabeled** students.

Misaligned benchmarks identified the **wrong** students for additional supports or acceleration.

Real Student
Example
**Naperville
North High
School**



- **GPA: 3.9**
- 7 AP courses
- 2 industry certifications
- Basketball, competitive marching band, volunteering
- **English language arts: 490**
(“not proficient”)
- **Math: 530** *(“not proficient”)*

Real Student Example **Liberty High School**



- **GPA: 3.75**
- 4 AP courses
- 2 dual credit courses
- Maintained consecutive year-round employment and multiple co-curricular activities
- **English language arts: 530**
("not proficient")
- **Math: 530** *("not proficient")*

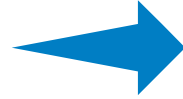
Real Student
Example
**East St. Louis
Senior High
School**



- **GPA: 4.0**
- 6 dual credit courses
- Consistent summer employment
- Work-based learning experience
- 10+ clubs and leadership activities
- **English language arts: 500**
(“not proficient”)
- **Math: 530** *(“not proficient”)*

If they had listened to us, they may not have enrolled in higher education...

Naperville North High School graduate



Currently enrolled at Mizzou - University of Missouri

Liberty High School graduate



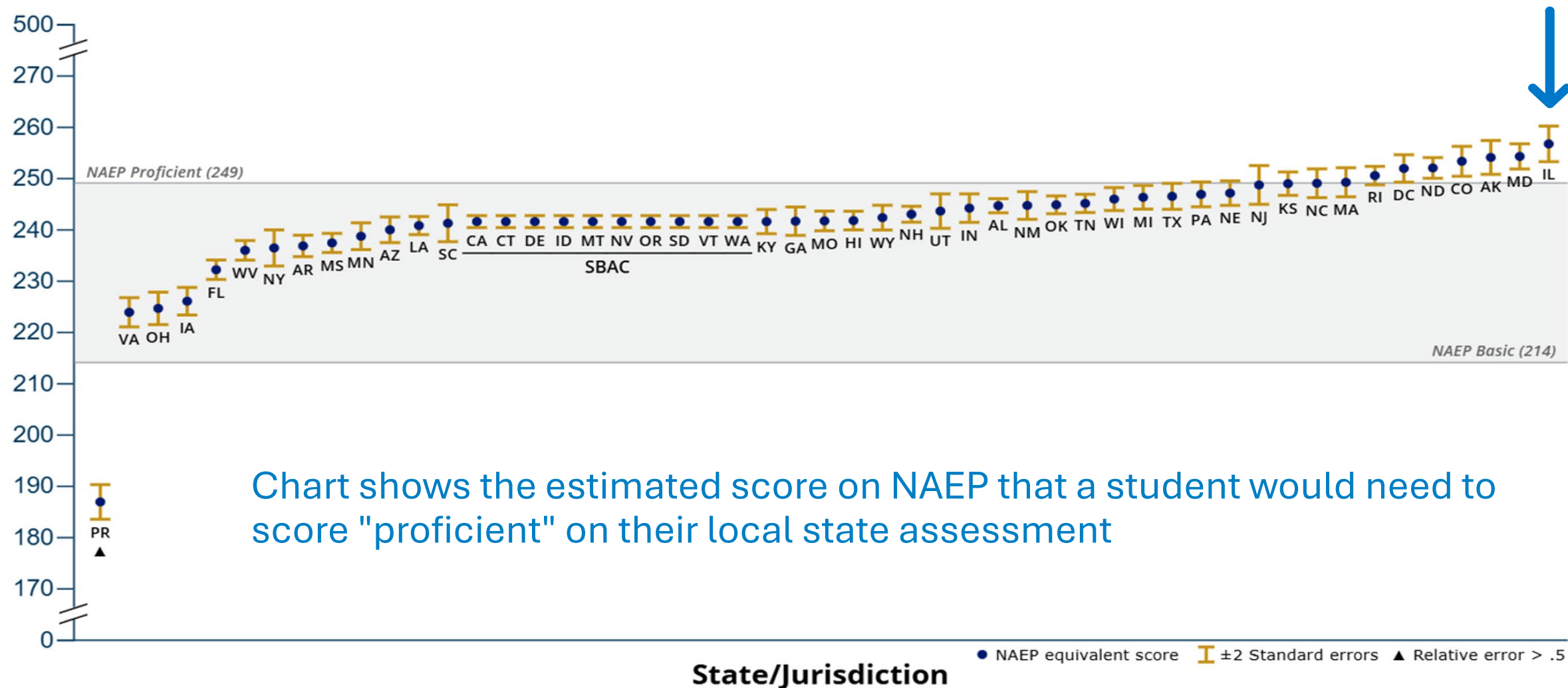
Currently enrolled at John Wood Community College

East St. Louis Senior High School graduate

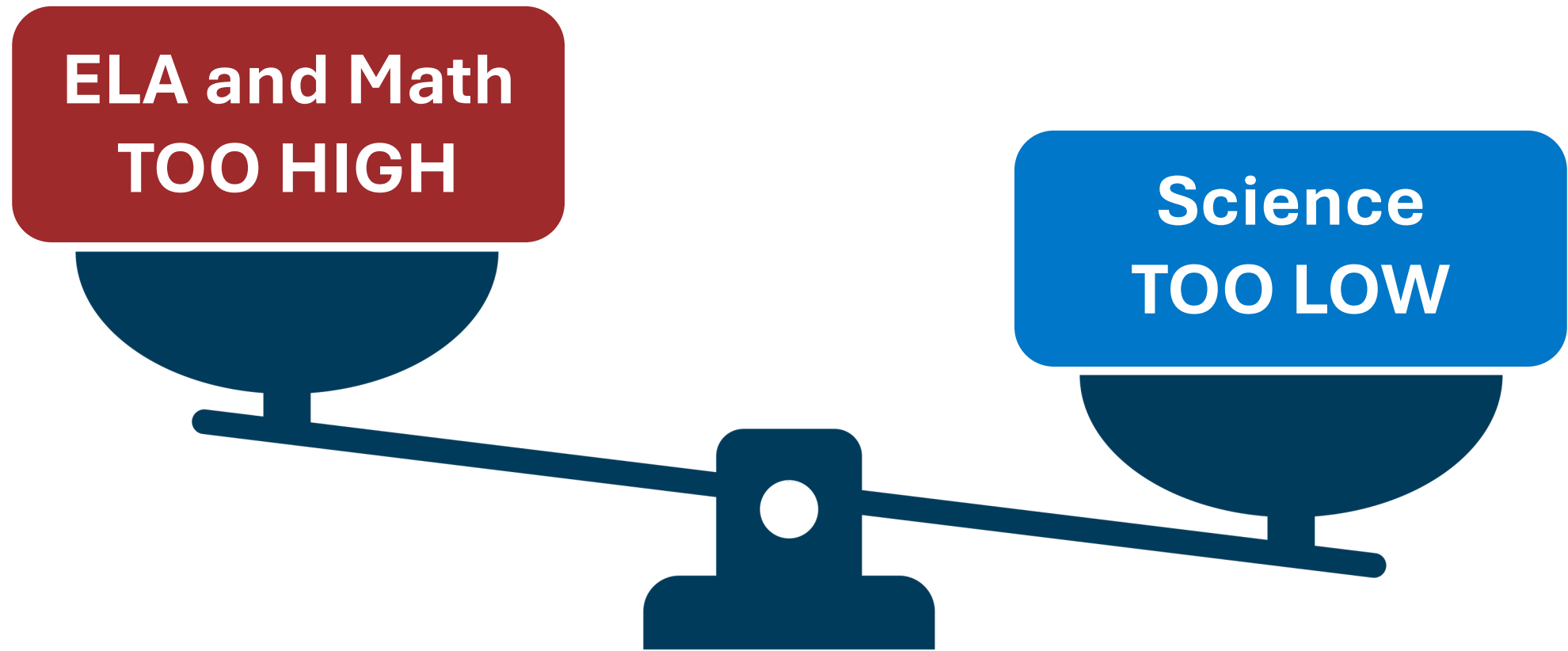


Currently enrolled at Southwestern Illinois College

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.

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	

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

How did we get there?

ELA + MATHEMATICS

SAT adopted as the state's
high school assessment in
2017

Aligned high school
benchmarks to 3-8 assessment
instead of to college and career
expectations

How did we get there?

SCIENCE

A diagram with the word 'SCIENCE' in a large, bold, dark blue font at the top center. Below it, three dotted lines with circular endpoints point to three separate text blocks. The first block on the left says 'Set science performance levels using 2021 data'. The middle block says 'Had insufficient student participation and representation'. The third block on the right says 'Resulted in misaligned performance levels'.

Set science
performance levels
using 2021 data

Had insufficient
student
participation and
representation

Resulted in
misaligned
performance
levels

The Process

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%

Goal:

Alignment with College and Career Expectations

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

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

Process Integrity Safeguards

Independent Observation

- Center for Assessment monitored all sessions
- Affirms that the cut scores recommended by the panels were derived through a rigorous process consistent with industry standards

Multiple Rounds of Feedback

- Daily evaluations and adjustments
- Statistical analysis of panelist agreement
- Identification and resolution of inconsistencies

Vertical Articulation Review

- Cross-grade patterns analyzed for logical progression
- Policy-relevant discussions about coherence expectations
- Final consensus building across all participants

The Result

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	

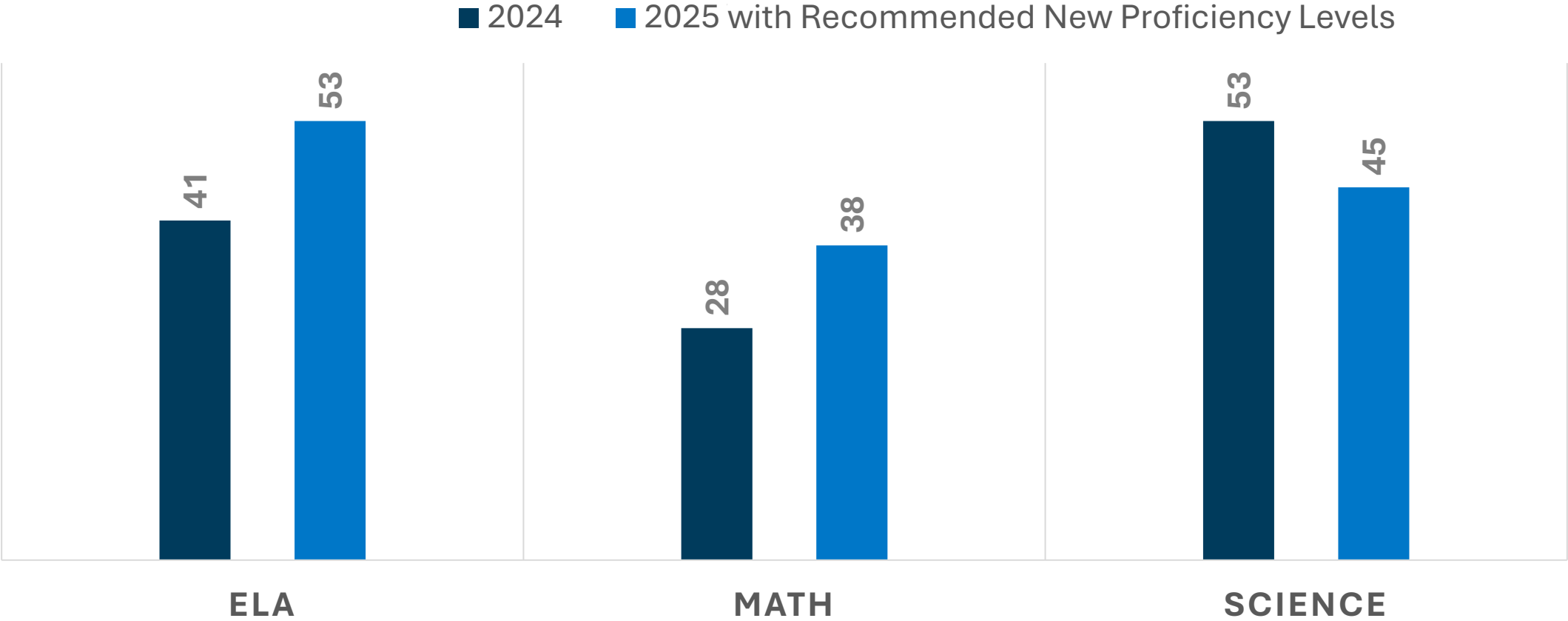
New Aligned Benchmarks for Proficiency

		ELA		Math		Science	
		Old	New	Old	New	Old	New
IAR & ISA	Grade 3	750	735	750	732		
	Grade 4	750	737	750	740		
	Grade 5	750	739	750	740	799	812
	Grade 6	750	741	750	742		
	Grade 7	750	743	750	745		
ACT	Grade 8	750	745	750	745	799	812
	Grade 9*	N/A	14	N/A	17	N/A	14
	Grade 10*	N/A	15	N/A	18	N/A	16
	Grade 11*	N/A	18	N/A	19	N/A	19

(*Note: Illinois' high school assessment changed from SAT to ACT, starting with spring 2025 testing, so there are no prior ACT benchmarks to compare.)

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.

We can continue to compare performance over time through the Student Growth Percentile.

SGP allows families, educators, and the state to continue to track progress from year to year.

Apples to apples comparison:

SGP uses raw scale scores, not performance levels.

Longitudinal SGP only available for grades 3-8.

ISBE will calculate SGP for high school for the first time using spring 2025 data.

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.

Appendix

Example of what each performance level means

Operations & Algebraic Thinking				
3.OA.1	Below Proficient	Approaching Proficient	Proficient	Above Proficient
Expectation at Proficient: Interpret the product of two whole numbers in terms of the number of groups and size of each group.	What is the product of 5×4 ?	There are 4 rows of 5 desks in a classroom. Which expression represents the total number of desks in the classroom? A. $4 - 5$ B. $4 + 5$ C. 4×5 D. $4 \div 5$	Which question can be answered with the expression 5×4 ? A. There are 5 books on 4 shelves. How many total books are on all the shelves? B. There are 5 books on a shelf and 4 fall off. How many books are left on the shelf? C. There are 5 books on a shelf. A student puts 4 more books on the shelf. How many books are now on the shelf? D. There are 5 books on a shelf. The books are placed into 4 boxes. How many books are in each box?	A teacher is packing boxes of books. Each box contains 4 books, and the teacher needs to pack 24 boxes. Explain how to determine the total number of books the teacher will pack.

New Cut Scores: IAR ELA

IAR Scale 650-850

Grade Level	Approaching Proficient		Proficient		Above Proficient	
	Former	Current	Former	Current	Former	Current
3	700	685 (-15)	750	735 (-15)	810	780 (-30)
4	700	695 (-5)	750	737 (-13)	790	780 (-10)
5	700	700 (0)	750	739 (-11)	799	780 (-19)
6	700	705 (+5)	750	741 (-9)	790	780 (-10)
7	700	710 (+10)	750	743 (-7)	785	785 (0)
8	700	710 (+10)	750	745 (-5)	794	795 (+1)

New Cut Scores: IAR Math

IAR Scale 650-850

Grade Level	Approaching Proficient		Proficient		Above Proficient	
	Former	Current	Former	Current	Former	Current
3	700	705 (+5)	750	732 (-18)	790	781 (-9)
4	700	708 (+8)	750	740 (-10)	790	784 (-6)
5	700	709 (+9)	750	740 (-10)	790	782 (-8)
6	700	705 (+5)	750	742 (-8)	785	773 (-12)
7	700	712 (+12)	750	745 (-5)	785	781 (-4)
8	700	705 (+5)	750	745 (-5)	785	791 (+6)

New Cut Scores: ISA

ISA Scale 700-900

Grade Level	Approaching Proficient		Proficient		Above Proficient	
	Current	Recommended	Current	Recommended	Current	Recommended
5	770	770 (0)	799	812 (+13)	832	856 (+23)
8	770	770 (0)	799	812 (+13)	832	856 (+23)

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.