

Right-Sizing Illinois' Benchmarks for Proficiency

Topline Messages & Talking Points

We needed to right-size our proficiency levels on state assessments. For years, Illinois' assessment data sent the wrong message to students, families, and educators. Proficiency rates on state assessments did not match up to realities in the classroom.

- 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.

Proficiency benchmarks were misaligned with other trusted national and state indicators.

- Illinois' previous performance levels did not align to national standards, to any other state assessments, or to any other student success data.
- To add to the confusion, each state assessment had a different number of performance levels, each with different names, and with different score thresholds.
- The result created an uneven playing field for Illinois students and confusion and frustration for Illinois teachers and families.

Our North Star has been to align the performance levels and proficiency benchmarks to real college and career expectations.

- ACT benchmarks are directly linked to post-secondary success data.
 - Educators participating in the performance level setting considered data on Illinois college placement requirements, such as the ACT score needed for a student to place into English Composition I or Intermediate Algebra at Illinois colleges and universities, as well as the probability of getting a C or higher in credit-bearing coursework. For example:
 - Eastern Illinois University uses a minimum score of 18 to place students into English Composition I.
 - A math score of 19 gives students a 63% chance of earning a C or higher.
 - Educators also considered alignment to career readiness, such as the ACT score that would likely earn a student a Silver Level National Career Readiness Certificate.
- Aligned expectations from elementary through high school give better, more meaningful readiness signals for students and families.

This change will bring clarity and consistency across assessments for families and educators alike, reflecting a truer picture of student learning and readiness.

- All state assessments will now use four unified performance levels: Above Proficient, Proficient, Approaching Proficient, and Below Proficient.
- Due to the recalibrated benchmarks, proficiency rates will shift to reflect a truer picture of student learning and readiness.

Illinois' education system leads the nation, and our students are out-performing national averages on assessments like NAEP, Advanced Placement (AP), and other key metrics. Many of those same students are being told they do not meet standards on Illinois exams based on the benchmarks. Educators and families deserve more accurate information about student performance.

- [U.S. World and News Report](#) ranks Illinois fourth in the nation for Pre-K-12 education, fifth for college readiness, seventh for NAEP reading scores and ninth for preschool enrollment.
- CNBC gives Illinois an "A" and ranks us third in the nation for Education.
- Results from the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show Illinois students performed above the national average in eighth grade reading and math. Illinois students' performance held steady across all subjects and grades from 2022 to 2024, despite the nation showing significant reading declines for students in grades 4 and 8.

- Illinois' high school graduation rate in 2024 reached an all-time, 14-year high at 87.7%.
- Illinois [ranks](#) among the top five states in [multiple Advanced Placement success metrics](#), including overall participation and performance, with especially strong gains among Black, Hispanic, and Asian graduates.

Misalignment has serious, real-world consequences.

- Misaligned proficiency data leads to the wrong students and the wrong schools being identified for additional support.
- Our assessments should give students, educators, and families meaningful information about students' readiness for college and career, not hold students back or discourage them from pursuing opportunities to the fullest extent of their abilities.
 - Take, for example, an actual Naperville North High School graduate.
 - They had a 3.9 GPA and had taken seven AP courses.
 - They had earned two industry certifications, participated in basketball and competitive marching band, and actively volunteered.
 - Wouldn't you say that's an ideal student record? Someone clearly qualified for success in college and career? Yet our assessment cut scores told them they were not proficient, not college ready.
 - Thankfully, they did not listen to our assessment and went on to enroll at Mizzou (University of Missouri).
 - Or consider a real student from Liberty High School.
 - They had a 3.75 GPA and took four AP and two dual credit courses, in addition to maintaining consecutive year-round employment and participating in multiple co-curricular activities.
 - Aren't these exactly the kind of college and career preparation experiences we're encouraging all students to have? Yet our state assessment told them no, they were not proficient. Thankfully, they did not listen either and went on to enroll at John Wood Community College.
 - Here's another example: This East St. Louis Senior High School graduate had a 4.0 GPA, had taken six dual credit courses, engaged in consistent summer employment and work-based learning, as well as 10+ clubs and leadership activities. But our assessment cut scores told them they were not proficient.
 - They went on to enroll at Southwestern Illinois College, illustrating just how misaligned our proficiency benchmarks are to actual student outcomes.
 - All of these students went on to enroll in college, *but think of the students who did not*. Think of the students who decided not to enroll in dual credit or AP or

even honors courses because our assessment incorrectly told them they were not on track.

- Misleading proficiency data also leads to high-achieving students missing out on opportunities for accelerated learning.
 - The Accelerated Placement Act requires school districts to automatically enroll students into the next most rigorous level of advanced coursework if they meet or exceed state standards on a state assessment.

ISBE has proceeded deliberately, thoughtfully, and transparently, following research-based best practices for establishing performance levels. The process spanned 18 months and involved hundreds of educators and content experts, overseen and validated by national technical experts.

- This unprecedented 18-month effort was truly collaborative, research-driven and transparent:
 - ISBE [announced](#) the effort in March 2024.
 - ISBE presented at over a dozen education conferences and regional convenings in 2024.
 - ISBE conducted a statewide listening tour in 2025 with nine sessions, attended by hundreds of educators and stakeholders.
 - More than 200 educators from diverse backgrounds helped develop Performance Level Descriptors that define what performance on the state test looks like at each performance level, in each subject, all the way from grade 3 to grade 11.
 - We sought the feedback of student leaders, postsecondary voices, and community members, to ensure relevance and clarity.
 - 150 highly qualified educators and subject-matter experts set updated performance benchmarks based on actual test items.
 - The entire process was monitored and validated by ISBE’s Technical Advisory Committee and national experts from the Center for Assessment.
- The state board voted to approve the new performance levels on Aug. 13, 2025.
- Students, families, and educators will see the aligned proficiency levels and right-sized “percent proficient” data for Illinois schools and districts on the 2025 Illinois Report Card this October.
- The accountability system and accountability designations will stay the same for 2025 but will utilize the new proficiency rate data to better identify schools for support.

Illinois’ high expectations for students remain rigorous and unchanged.

- Illinois learning standards and the assessments themselves remain rigorous and unchanged.
- What’s changing is how we align our definition of “proficiency,” across assessments and to other trusted measures of student performance, so that we deliver more useful and accurate data to students, educators, and families.

Illinois students have shown tremendous recovery after the pandemic, even under a misaligned system.

- Even based on our current, restrictive benchmarks for proficiency, Illinois students have made nation-leading progress in recovering from the pandemic.
 - Students in grades 3-8 achieved a proficiency rate of 40.9% in English Language Arts, the highest ever since students began taking the Illinois Assessment of Readiness in 2019.
 - The overall state-level ELA proficiency rates now exceed pre-pandemic levels for students in every race/ethnicity group, as well as English Learners, students with IEPs, and low-income students.
 - Our math proficiency rates have also improved in grades 3-8.
 - The overall state-level math proficiency rates increased in every race/ethnicity group, as well as among English Learners, students with IEPs, and low-income students, but remained lower than pre-pandemic levels.
 - Growth continues to outpace growth pre-pandemic.

We will maintain our ability to compare performance over time.

- The Student Growth Percentile allows us to continue to track our progress in recovering from the pandemic.
- The Student Growth Percentile uses raw scores (not proficiency rates or performance levels) to compare how much students grew in a given year.
- The Student Growth Percentile still allows apples-to-apples comparisons over time.
- ISBE will calculate a Student Growth Percentile at the high school level for this first time this year.
- Additionally, families will still be able to track their individual student’s progress by comparing raw scale scores from year to year, which are not affected by these changes.