

## ILLINOIS STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION MEETING

May 14, 2025

**To:** Illinois State Board of Education

**From:** Dr. Tony Sanders, State Superintendent of Education  
Dr. Kimako Patterson, Chief of Staff  
Dr. Jason Helfer, Chief Education Officer - Instruction

**Agenda Topic:** Approval of Unified Academic Achievement Standard Setting Methodology

**Expected Outcome:** Discussion and approval of standard setting methodology

**Materials:** N/A

**Staff Contact(s):** A. Rae Clementz, Executive Director of Data, Accountability and Assessment  
Angela Foxall, Director of Assessment

### **Purpose of Agenda Item**

The Assessment Department requests the Board to authorize the state superintendent to conduct a unified academic achievement standard setting for all general state assessments of English/language arts (ELA), mathematics, and science using the methodology described in this memo.

### **Background Information/History**

In March 2024, State Superintendent Dr. Tony Sanders announced a plan to address a longstanding issue with state assessment benchmarks -- high proficiency cut scores<sup>1</sup> that misclassify students on track for college or career as not meeting academic standards. Dr. Sanders directed the Assessment Department to conduct Illinois' first unified academic achievement standard setting in a decade, aligning proficiency expectations across all subjects and grades.

This unified approach is critical, as Illinois has faced persistent challenges with proficiency benchmark alignment. Inconsistencies between benchmarks for the Prairie State Achievement Exam<sup>2</sup> and Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) led the state to raise ISAT proficiency benchmarks in 2013. Illinois briefly adopted the unified Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) assessments and benchmarks from 2015 to 2016, before adopting the SAT as the high school assessment in 2017. The 2017 standard setting avoided grade band alignment conflicts by maintaining the existing proficiency expectations for elementary grades. As a result, according to the "2022 NAEP Mapping Study<sup>3</sup>," which maps state proficiency benchmarks onto the common NAEP scale, found that Illinois holds some of the most challenging academic expectations in the nation:

- Highest proficiency benchmarks for fourth grade mathematics
- Second highest for eighth grade reading
- Third highest for eighth grade mathematics
- Fourth highest for fourth grade reading

At the high school level, these challenging expectations resulted in benchmarks that exceeded national norms for college and career readiness.

Illinois is not lowering its academic standards; the [Illinois Learning Standards](#) remain unchanged. The goal is to provide schools – and, more importantly, students – with more reliable information about academic proficiency. The 2025 unified academic achievement standard setting aims to ensure coherence across assessments of ELA, mathematics, and science for Grades 3 through 11. It also seeks to calibrate proficiency expectations – preserving academic rigor while aligning them with longitudinal data from multiple empirical measures of academic and postsecondary success.

### **Current Status:**

### **Three Major Tasks of Standard Setting**

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<sup>1</sup> A proficiency cut score is the score a student needs to be considered proficient on state assessments.

<sup>2</sup> A customized version of the ACT college entrance exam.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics: [Mapping State Proficiency Standards onto the NAEP Scales](#).

Standard setting involves three major tasks<sup>4</sup>:

1. **Establish performance level definitions.**

These policy statements define the number and names of performance levels, as well as the intended rigor and desired student performance associated with each level.

On June 11, 2024, ISBE convened a [broad-based group of education leaders](#), including student leaders, from across the state for a workshop<sup>5</sup> led by the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment. Participants were asked to draft policy definitions for new unified state assessment performance levels and offer guidance for subsequent standard setting tasks. Their input aimed to ensure that future work was clear, appropriately rigorous, aligned with stakeholder values, and would support the effective and appropriate use of standardized assessment data. Draft policy definitions and a [supporting report](#) were posted on the ISBE website for 33 days of public comment (from July 28 to Aug. 30, 2024).

After careful consideration of all public comments, final policy definitions were adopted:

| Level                  | Assessment Performance within this range...  |
|------------------------|--|
| Above Proficient       | ... demonstrates knowledge and application of the assessed <a href="#">Illinois Learning Standards</a> that is <b>above proficient</b> for this subject and grade. Performance in this range is <b>strong</b> evidence that students are prepared for the academic demands of the next grade and are progressing toward the academic expectations of the next grade, which serve as a foundation for the pursuit of college and/or a career.   |
| Proficient             | ... demonstrates <b>proficient</b> knowledge and application of the assessed <a href="#">Illinois Learning Standards</a> for this subject and grade. Performance in this range is evidence that students are prepared for the academic demands of the next grade and are progressing toward the academic expectations of the next grade, which serve as a foundation for the pursuit of college and/or a career.   |
| Approaching Proficient | ... demonstrates knowledge and application of the assessed <a href="#">Illinois Learning Standards</a> for this subject and grade that is <b>approaching proficient</b> . Performance in this range is evidence that students <b>may need additional support</b> (the nature and manner of which <i>must be informed by multiple sources of information</i> ) to demonstrate success with the academic demands of the next grade, which serve as a foundation for the pursuit of college and/or a career.        |
| Below Proficient       | ... demonstrates knowledge and application of the assessed <a href="#">Illinois Learning Standards</a> that is <b>below proficient</b> for this subject and grade. Performance in this range is <b>strong</b> evidence that students <b>may need additional support</b> (the nature and manner of which <i>must be informed by multiple sources of information</i> ) to demonstrate success with the academic demands of the next grade, which serve as a foundation for the pursuit of college and/or a career. |

Only the final names of the performance levels differed substantively from the options initially drafted by the policy group. Naming was an area in which the group did not reach consensus. As a result, the public comment process specifically invited respondents to express a preference for descriptive names, numeric levels, a combination of both, or an alternative naming structure. The selected names reflect feedback received during the workshop and through public comment indicating the draft names were confusing for parents — particularly those for whom English is a second language. Numeric levels also were considered problematic, both because the order representing best and worst was not intuitive<sup>6</sup> and they could be conflated with grade point averages.

2. **Develop performance level descriptors.**

Performance level descriptors (PLDs) describe the range of observable student performance characteristics within each performance level. Large-scale standardized assessments assess multiple pathways to proficiency and students may demonstrate competence through different strengths within a given performance range.

<sup>4</sup> Zieky, Michael J., and Marianne Perie. "A Primer on Setting Cut Scores on Tests of Educational Achievement." Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> A virtual orientation to the work for participants was held on May 20, 2024. The group closed its work with a virtual meeting on July 18, 2024, to discuss any final edits to the policy definition and guidance report.

<sup>6</sup> Numbers 1-4 can be interpreted either ordinally as 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> where 1<sup>st</sup> is best, or quantitatively as 4, 3, 2, 1 where 4 is best.

ISBE recruited over 200 applicants with demonstrated experience working with the Illinois Learning Standards in ELA, mathematics, and/or science, such as teaching, coaching, and/or curriculum development, and from that created nine writing teams (three subjects – ELA, mathematics, and science – with three grade groups – Grades 3-5, 6-8, and 9-11 – each). Each group had between 10 and 12 writers, and included:

- Three to six grade-specific content experts
- Three to six subject matter experts whose position spanned multiple grades and required deep expertise with the content and standards
- At least one non-assessed subject educator
- At least one special education educator
- At least one multilingual educator

Each team also had at least one member from each of six geographic regions in Illinois, with the city of Chicago as a separate seventh region,<sup>7</sup> and included the demographic diversity of Illinois educators.

The teams met every other week from September 2024 through February 2025. ISBE representatives attended nine stakeholder meetings and collected over 6,700 comments and suggestions during this period. The writing teams used this input to develop two sets of [draft PLDs](#) for each assessed subject and grade. One set was organized by standard and written in sufficient detail to support classroom educators – the primary contributors to standard setting. The second set was organized by broad domains and designed to be shorter, more accessible, and suitable for discussing proficiency expectations with parents and community members. Finally, a supplemental resource set featuring test items and/or sample student work aligned to the PLDs was created because examples across performance levels was the resource most frequently requested by all stakeholders.

This [suite of 53 documents](#) was posted on the ISBE website for 32 days of public comment (from March 7 through April 7, 2025) along with a set of guiding questions to promote deep review and critique. Additionally, ISBE presented the PLDs to the State Assessment Review Committee and requested that members conduct their own deep review with their staff or constituents. This feedback is currently being incorporated, and a second draft of the PLDs will be posted for a final round of public comment from May 5 through June 6, 2025. PLDs will be finalized and distributed to selected standard setting panelists at the end of June.

### 3. **Recommend cut scores.**

A cut score is the lowest score a student must earn to be classified within a given performance level. The specific process used to recommend cut scores constitutes the standard setting methodology.

Although the tests differ in design and score scales, ISBE's testing vendors — Pearson and ACT — worked together to create a single, unified plan for setting performance levels on state assessments. This plan will help determine the score ranges for four performance levels on the Illinois Assessment of Readiness, the Illinois Science Assessment, and the ACT tests (PreACT 9 Secure, PreACT Secure, and the ACT with Writing).

Three common standard setting methodologies employed for state accountability assessments are the Angoff method and its derivatives, Bookmarking, and ID matching<sup>8</sup>. College entrance exams may also make use of a more empirical method<sup>9</sup> that seeks to establish statistical relationships between test scores and post- secondary outcomes.

The goal of all standard setting methods is to assist educators in reaching consensus judgments about student performance for which they have a high degree of confidence. Standard setting methodologies differ in how they attempt to draw out educators' expertise and reduce the cognitive demand of the task. Common variants include:

- Making the judgment simpler (e.g., asking for Yes/No judgments instead of percentile estimates as with modified Angoff methods)
- Shifting the focus of the judgment (e.g., focusing on the item rather than student performance as with ID Matching)
- Providing different types of data on either item difficulty or student performance (e.g., booklets that put the test questions in order from least to most difficult, as with Bookmarking, or present

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<sup>7</sup> See ISBE McKinney-Vento [Lead Area Liaison Map](#).

<sup>8</sup> Moyer, Eric, Dugan, Jennifer, Dugan, Steve, Ferrara, Russ, and Perie, Marianne, "Setting the Standard: Navigating Methods for Defining Educational Benchmarks," presentation at the National Conference on Student Assessment, June 26, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Wayne J. Camara, Jeffery M. Allen, and Jeffrey L. Moore, "Empirically-Based College and Career Readiness Cut Scores and Performance Standards," in *Preparing Students for College and Careers: Theory, Measurement, and Educational Practice*, ed. Katie Larsen McClarty, Krista D. Mattern, and Matthew N. Gaertner (New York: Routledge, 2017).

performance profiles that include score distribution maps or performance on similar tests, which is a more empirical approach)

Drafts of the standard setting plan were presented to the Illinois Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) in September 2024 and January 2025. TAC members offered detailed -- but sometimes conflicting -- recommendations about which variation of a judgment task they felt would best support ISBE's goals. To resolve these conflicting recommendations, ISBE requested that Pearson conduct a mini-study comparing two approaches: a variation of the Angoff method Extended Modified-Angoff (Yes/No)<sup>10</sup> and the Item-Descriptor Matching<sup>11</sup> methodology.

Twelve ISBE staff with experience as classroom teachers were recruited from departments other than Assessment (e.g., Standards and Instruction, Special Education, Multilingual/Language Development, School Improvement, Accountability, Charter Schools, etc.). After being divided into two groups by subject, they conducted one round of judgments. Each group used a different methodology first to reduce bias based on presentation order. The study found score outcome was the same for both methodologies, but that a majority of participants expressed a preference for the Extended Modified-Angoff methodology, particularly when provided with a briefing that included score distribution maps.

Thus, the recommended plan for standard setting combines the Extended Modified-Angoff (Yes/No) methodology with elements of ACT's empirical approach, which looks at how test scores relate to students' chances of earning certain grades in first-year college courses and makes statistical connections across the ACT tests.

ISBE will empanel 19 committees:

- Grades 3 through 8 for reading and math (12 committees)
- Grades 5 and 8 for science (two committees)
- ACT for ELA, math, and science, PreACT, and PreACT 9 (five committees)

Table 1 shows the days the committees will meet during the week of July 14-18. This staggered approach builds incremental articulation across committees by preselecting two to three panelists on each committee (approximately 33 in total) to participate in a second committee one grade higher or lower. On the last day, a formal articulation process will occur to align the cuts vertically across grades from Grade 3 to high school in ELA, mathematics, and science with a content reasonableness review as a final step in the process for coherence.

Each committee will have 12 to 18 panelists per committee split into three table groups. There will be one professional facilitator per committee, one ISBE Assessment Department representative per committee, and additional observers from the TAC and ISBE leadership. Recruitment of panelists began on April 21, 2025, and over 600 applications were received within the first week.

**Table 1.** Recommended Standard Setting Committee Schedule

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<sup>10</sup> Plake, Barbara S., A. A. Ferdous, James C. Impara, and Chad W. Buckendahl, "Setting Multiple Performance Standards Using the Yes/No Method: An Alternative Item Mapping Method" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council on Measurement in Education, Montreal, Canada, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Ferrara, Steve, Perie, Marianne, and Johnson, Eugene. "Matching the Judgemental Task with Standard Setting Panelist Expertise: The Item Descriptor (ID) Matching Method." *Journal of Applied Testing Technology*

| Committee                         | Mon | Tues     | Wed  | Thurs. | Fri. Vertical Articulation |
|-----------------------------------|-----|----------|------|--------|----------------------------|
| ELA3                              |     |          | ELA3 |        | 14                         |
| ELA4                              |     | ELA4     |      |        |                            |
| ELA5                              |     |          | ELA5 |        |                            |
| ELA6                              |     | ELA6     |      |        |                            |
| ELA7                              |     |          | ELA7 |        |                            |
| ELA8                              |     | ELA8     |      |        |                            |
| ACT (English, Reading, & Writing) |     | ACT ELA  |      |        | 14                         |
| MAT3                              |     |          | MAT3 |        |                            |
| MAT4                              |     | MAT4     |      |        |                            |
| MAT5                              |     |          | MAT5 |        |                            |
| MAT6                              |     | MAT6     |      |        |                            |
| MAT7                              |     |          | MAT7 |        |                            |
| MAT8                              |     | MAT8     |      |        | 6                          |
| ACT (Math)                        |     | ACT MATH |      |        |                            |
| SCI5                              |     |          | SCI5 |        |                            |
| SCI8                              |     | SCI8     |      |        |                            |
| ACT (Sci)                         |     | ACT SCI  |      |        |                            |

The recommended cut scores and associated impact data will be reviewed July 22-25, 2025, to determine if any adjustments to the recommended cut scores are warranted in light of policy definitions and guidance. Final cut score recommendations will be presented to the Board for both discussion and approval at the August 2025 Board meeting. Expedited review and approval is necessary both to ensure that ISBE has sufficient time to apply the approved cut scores to data for the 2025 Report Card release at the end of October. This also will allow districts to preview the impact of the new performance levels on their preliminary Report Card data in both the Data Review and Verification Tool (from approval through Sept. 30) and Educator Preview (Oct. 1 through Oct. 29).

### **Relationship to the State Board's Strategic Plan**

This work supports the agency's mission to practice data-informed stewardship by making our proficiency data more valid and reliable. More reliable assessment data will improve school and district capacity to provide students with appropriate resources and supports to increase their knowledge and skills. This work is a necessary precursor to Goals 1.2: Statewide System of Support and Goal 1.3: Regional Offices of Education (ROEs)/Intermediate Service Centers (ISCs)/Rural Leadership Development as these systems cannot improve district capacity for data-informed stewardship without first improving the quality of the data. Better data also will help us achieve Goal 2: Learning Conditions by allowing us to better identify the necessary resources to create safe, healthy, and welcoming learning environments that meet the academic needs of every student.

### **Analysis and Implications for Policy, Budget, Legislative Action, and Communications**

**Policy Implications:** Conducting the unified academic achievement standard setting will significantly improve the validity, reliability, and thus the utility of state assessment data to drive state-, district-, and school-level policy, practice, and resource allocation decision.

**Budget Implications:** None. The one-time costs associated with this initiative were built into the procurement and contracts of the applicable assessment vendors.

**Legislative Action:** None. ISBE will be required to submit its new cut scores as well as robust documentation of its standard setting process as a part of its next federal peer review submission.

**Communication:** All information about this work has been published the [ISBE Better Systems for Better Outcomes webpage](#). Fall 2024 and spring 2025 listening tours were held across the state to promote awareness of the initiative and collect feedback on the work. Finally, ISBE is developing a Communication Toolkit with resources for administrators, teachers, school board members, parents, students, media, and the community broadly to promote understanding of the impact that these new performance levels will have.

**Board Member(s) Who Will Abstain:** None.

### **Superintendent's Recommendation**

I recommend that the following motion be adopted:

The State Board of Education hereby authorizes the state superintendent to conduct a unified academic achievement standard setting for all general state assessments of English/language arts, mathematics, and science using a combined Extended Modified-Angoff (Yes/No) methodology with elements of ACT's empirical approach.

### **Next Steps**

ISBE will finalize recruitment of standard setting panelists and transmit the policy definitions and PLDs to these participants for review. The standard setting will be held July 14-18, 2025, in Springfield. Recommendations for the unified performance levels and new cut scores will be presented to the Board for discussion and approval Aug. 16, 2025. Upon approval, the new performance levels will be applied to 2025 assessment data in preparation for reporting on the 2025 Report Card.

**Date of Board Action:** May 14, 2025