

Right-Sizing Illinois' Benchmarks for Proficiency

Frequently Asked Questions

Overview

1. Why is the state changing its proficiency benchmarks?

Illinois' benchmarks for proficiency in English language arts and math were among the most restrictive in the country and did not reflect the reality of student performance in the classroom. For example, in 4th grade math, Illinois had the most difficult-to-reach proficiency benchmark in the nation. For every other grade and subject, our proficiency benchmarks ranked among the top four most restrictive. 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, we faced the opposite issue—the benchmark was set too low. Far more students were being labeled “proficient” than what educators observed in classrooms. This misalignment made it difficult to identify where deeper support was needed.

This misalignment has serious, real-world consequences. Inaccurate proficiency data leads to the wrong students and the wrong schools being identified for additional support, misdirecting state resources and taxpayer dollars. This change is about better aligning our proficiency benchmarks with research-backed indicators of college and career readiness.

2. What are the new, unified performance levels?

All state assessments will now use four unified performance levels: **Above Proficient**, **Proficient**, **Approaching Proficient**, and **Below Proficient**. This change will bring clarity and consistency across assessments for families and educators alike. The benchmark for proficiency – or the lowest score needed to be considered “proficient” – will also now align to other rigorous and trusted measures of student achievement and real postsecondary expectations.

Previous 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 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

Process

3. How did ISBE consider college and career expectations in setting the performance levels?

Illinois' new performance levels align to real college and career readiness expectations. The new performance levels are designed to ensure that "proficient" means a student is truly on track for success after high school. Educators considered how each grade level connects to the one above it, leading to the ultimate goal of college and career readiness. The ACT benchmarks, to which all other grades are vertically aligned, 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 in college credit-bearing math coursework.

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 college and career readiness signals for students and families.

4. Was this decision based on research?

Yes. This decision is grounded in national studies from the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) comparing state benchmarks, as well as national benchmarks for college readiness, real college placement and success probability from Illinois colleges and universities, and actual student outcomes.

Take, for example, an actual 2022 Naperville North High School graduate with a 3.9 GPA, seven AP classes, two industry certifications, participation in athletics and marching band, and volunteer experience. Despite these achievements, the state assessment labeled them “not proficient” – yet today, they are thriving at Mizzou (University of Missouri). Or consider a 2023 East St. Louis Senior High School graduate with a 4.0 GPA, six dual credit courses, summer employment, work-based learning experience and extensive club involvement and student leadership positions – also deemed “not proficient” by our state assessment benchmarks. Today they are excelling at Southwestern Illinois College.

ISBE worked with hundreds of Illinois educators and content experts, as well as national technical experts, to ensure we followed a validated process and to ensure our new benchmarks reflect what students truly need to be ready for college and career.

Educators, school leaders, and families have long asked for a more realistic and useful way to define proficiency. The Illinois State Board of Education is listening.

5. Why were Illinois’ benchmarks misaligned in the first place?

When Illinois 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. The high school benchmarks were aligned to the benchmarks for the grades 3-8 assessment, and neither took data on college and career expectations into consideration.

In science, the U.S. Department of Education denied Illinois’ request to delay the setting of its performance levels in 2021, forcing ISBE to establish performance levels based on assessment data from 2021, which was heavily impacted by the pandemic. Participation in state assessments in 2021 was extremely low and was not representative of the statewide student population.

To add to the confusion, each assessment in Illinois’ system had a different set of performance levels, each with different names.

The result was an uneven playing field for Illinois students and confusion and frustration for Illinois teachers and families. Through the new system, we are bringing coherence and alignment to the state assessment system and delivering more meaningful and accurate data to teachers, families, and students.

6. What process did ISBE use to determine the new performance levels? Were parents or teachers consulted?

ISBE proceeded deliberately, thoughtfully, and transparently, following research-based best practices for establishing unified performance levels.

ISBE presented at over a dozen education conferences and regional convenings in 2024, then in 2025, conducted a statewide listening tour with nine stops all across Illinois. We engaged not only parents and teachers, but also student leaders, postsecondary partners, and community members.

More than 200 educators—representing diverse regions, backgrounds, and areas of expertise—participated in working groups to develop the Performance Level Descriptors that define what proficiency looks like in each subject all the way from grade 3 to grade 12, which we further refined through public comment.

ISBE then convened a group of highly qualified educators and subject-matter experts to establish updated performance benchmarks, based on the Performance Level Descriptors and considering alignment to other measures of secondary and postsecondary success, for all our state assessments that will offer a more accurate view of student learning.

The state board will discuss and vote on the recommended benchmarks on Aug. 16, 2025.

7. How does this change compare to other states?

Federal law requires states to administer state assessments and to report out about student performance on those assessments. But each state can decide for itself how many performance levels there are, where the cut scores dividing the levels fall, and which levels count as “proficient.”

Illinois’ proficiency benchmarks in ELA and math were significantly more restrictive than those used in almost every other state. That’s what makes comparing proficiency rates across states like comparing apples to oranges. Previously, a student who was judged “not proficient” in Illinois could step over the border into one of our neighboring states and be deemed “proficient” with the exact same score.

Right-sizing our benchmarks gives students, families, and educators more accurate, more useful, and more comparable proficiency data, while still holding high expectations.

Comparing Data Across Years

8. Can we still compare year-over-year data reliably?

While the definition of “proficient” is changing, this change does not affect students’ raw scale scores or the calculation of [Student Growth Percentiles](#). This ensures we can continue to compare performance over time and monitor ongoing recovery from the pandemic. ISBE will calculate a Student Growth Percentile at the high school level for the first time in 2025.

Educators and parents/families should not compare 2025 proficiency rates to prior years but should utilize the [Student Growth Percentile](#) to understand how a school’s performance on the state assessment compares to other schools and to prior years.

9. How do I interpret the Student Growth Percentile?

The Student Growth Percentile describes how much a student grew compared to their academic peers who started at the same level. An academic peer is a student in the same grade and the same subject with the same test score in the previous year.

The SGP represents a percentile, not a percent. It tells you how students’ growth on average compares to other students’ growth. It does not indicate how much they grew – only whether their growth was above or below the state average, which is always the 50th percentile. It’s like when the pediatrician says a child is in the 75th percentile for height, that means the child is taller than 75% of other children of the same age.

Where to See Changes

10. Where do parents/families and schools see proficiency information?

Parents/families see their individual student’s scale score, performance level, and whether that performance level qualifies as proficient, on the on the Individual Score Report they receive after their student takes a state assessment.

Educators also have access to their students’ individual assessment results.

School and district leaders receive aggregate information about their school or district’s performance on the state assessment, including the “proficiency rate” or the percentage of students who scored in a performance level that qualifies as “proficient.” Federal education law requires ISBE to publish state-, district-, and school-level [report cards](#) with each entity’s proficiency rate, as well as to utilize proficiency rates in math and English language arts as part of an overall accountability system that assigns each school an [Annual Summative Designation](#) describing how well each school is meeting the needs of all its students.

Illinois’ accountability system weights math proficiency at 7.5%, English language arts proficiency at 7.5% and science proficiency at 5% of a school’s summative designation.

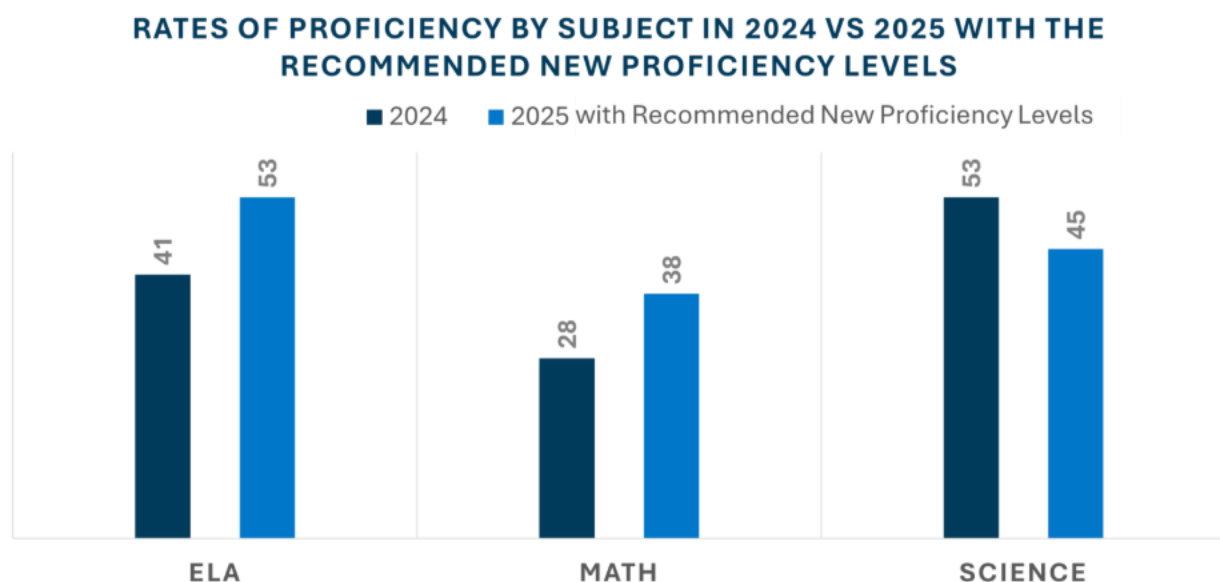
11. When will schools and parents/families see the new proficiency rates?

Pending state board approval, 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 in October 2025. School and district leaders will have the opportunity to preview their 2025 proficiency rates in September. Individual Score Reports from 2025 assessments will contain scale scores and Student Growth Percentiles but not performance level or proficiency information.

Impacts

12. How do the new, right-sized performance levels impact 2025 proficiency rates?

Due to the recalibrated benchmarks, proficiency rates will shift to reflect a truer picture of student learning and readiness. The chart below provides 2024 data compared with preliminary proficiency rates with the new thresholds. (Note: 2025 data below is preliminary and will not match final report card calculations.)



13. Are the tests or learning standards changing?

No. Illinois’ assessments and learning standards remain rigorous and unchanged. What students are expected to learn—and what teachers are expected to teach—has not changed. The tests themselves (format, length, testing platform, etc.) also remain the same.

Only how we calculate proficiency is changing, so that our benchmarks more accurately reflect college and career readiness.

14. Will benchmark changes affect how my school identifies students for supports?

The state assessment is only one of several tools schools can use to identify which students need additional support. Many schools primarily use local assessments, classroom performance, and teacher input. The state assessment should never be the sole instrument used to identify students for supports, particularly to determine if a student needs special education services.

The goal of this change is to equip schools and the state with a more accurate picture of who needs help—but it will not reduce support for students who need it. In fact, it may better highlight strengths that the old benchmarks overlooked.

15. Should schools change how they teach because of the new benchmarks?

No. Illinois' standards for what students should know and be able to do have not changed. Teachers should continue delivering high-quality instruction aligned to those standards. What's changing is how the test results are interpreted and reported to reflect a clearer, more accurate picture of readiness. Educators can use state assessment data to more accurately identify students for interventions, such as acceleration or additional support.

16. Will this change what information colleges or future schools see?

No. The college reportable score that grade 11 students receive for college applications will continue to only include the scale score, not the state-determined performance level or whether that level qualifies as "proficient."

17. How do the new performance levels affect the Accelerated Placement Act?

The automatic enrollment provision of the Illinois Acceleration Placement Act currently applies to high school students (grades 9-12). It mandates automatic eligibility for placement in the next most advanced course based on state assessment results for high school students who are above proficient on state standards. In other words, high school students who score in the Above Proficient performance level should be placed automatically in the next most rigorous course.

For high school students who score in the Proficient performance level, they should be given the *option* to take the next most rigorous course.

While the law does not require automatic acceleration in grades K-8, the Illinois Accelerated Placement Act does require each district to have a policy in place for acceleration in a single subject, for whole grade acceleration, and for early entrance.

According to 105 ILCS 5/14A-32, the policy must include the following requirements:

- A provision that states that participation in accelerated placement is not limited to those children who have been identified as gifted and talented, but rather is open to all

children who demonstrate high ability and who may benefit from accelerated placement;

- A fair and equitable decision-making process that involves multiple persons and includes a student's parents or guardians;
- Procedures for notifying parents or guardians of a child of a decision affecting that child's participation in an accelerated placement program; and
- An assessment process that includes multiple valid, reliable indicators.

According to 105 ILCS 5/14A-32, the policy also may include:

- Procedures for annually informing the community at-large, including parents or guardians, about accelerated placement opportunities and the methods used for the identification of children eligible for accelerated placement;
- A process for referral that allows for multiple referrers, including a child's parents or guardians: other referrers may include licensed educational professionals, the child, with written consent of a parent or guardian, through a licensed educational professional who has knowledge of the referred child's abilities, or in case of possible early entrance, a preschool educator, pediatrician, or psychologist who knows the child; and
- A provision that provides that children participating in an accelerated placement program and their parents or guardians will be provided a written plan specifying the type of acceleration the child will receive and strategies to support the child.

Accountability

18. How will this affect my school's annual accountability designations and school report card?

The new benchmarks will be reflected in the proficiency rates reported on the 2025 Illinois Report Card released in October 2025.

[Accountability designations](#) (Exemplary, Commendable, Targeted, Comprehensive, or Intensive) will still be based on the [current system of indicators](#) for one more year. However, the proficiency indicator will use the new proficiency rates in order to more accurately identify schools for support.

A new, more transparent and criterion-based accountability system will go into effect in fall 2026, after additional feedback and federal approval. Stay informed about ISBE's work to update the accountability system via [ISBE's Better Systems for Better Outcomes webpage](#).

19. Will the new performance levels and proficiency benchmarks affect schools who are currently in school improvement status (Targeted, Comprehensive, or Intensive status)?

No. There are no schools currently in school improvement status who are expected to exit status based on their 2025 summative designations. ISBE sought and received waivers of accountability requirements in school years 2019-20 and 2020-21, meaning no schools were newly identified for support in those years. Schools newly identified for support based on their 2022 summative designation are slated to exit status based on their performance in the 2025-26 school year, and their designation will be produced under the forthcoming updated accountability system.

Accountability designations (Exemplary, Commendable, Targeted, Comprehensive, or Intensive) will be based on the current system of indicators for one more year (2025). The proficiency indicator in 2025 will use the new proficiency rates in proficiency indicator calculations.

20. How will the new cut scores affect the College and Career Readiness Indicator criteria?

The new proficiency cut scores will not affect the College and Career Readiness Indicator criteria at this time. An updated, criterion-based accountability system will go into effect in fall 2026, after extensive feedback from the field and federal approval. Any changes to the College and Career Readiness Indicator will be implemented as a part of that process.

21. Which performance levels are considered “proficient” and included in percent proficient calculations?

The Above Proficient and Proficient categories are both considered “proficient” and included in the numerator of proficiency calculations.

22. How will these cut scores affect the proficiency targets and points awarded for the proficiency indicator in the accountability system?

[Proficiency targets for 2025](#) remain unchanged. Proficiency for accountability will continue to be calculated using the same grades (3-8 and 11 for ELA and math, 5, 8 and 11 for science) but will use the new performance levels and cut scores to determine which students are proficient. If the school is at or above the target, they receive the full points possible for the indicator. If they are not, they receive points proportional to how close to the target they are. This method of allocating points remains the same in 2025 as it has been in previous years.

ACT

23. Will ISBE provide proficiency scores for middle schools that give PreACT?

There are no state-established cut scores specific to grade 8 PreACT testing. The established PreACT Secure 9 cut scores are specific to the state-administered PreACT Secure. The specific population considered in establishing the cut scores are students completing the test in spring of grade 9. Schools giving PreACT to grade 8 students should consider the purpose for which

they are administering the assessment when considering what score thresholds to use to evaluate student performance.

24. How will the ACT cut scores affect the criteria for students to earn the State Seal of Biliteracy?

All three components of the ACT ELA score (English + Reading + Writing) are required to be considered for the Seal of Biliteracy. ISBE is currently re-evaluating the scoring criteria considering the recent standard setting. Stay tuned for more information.

25. What does “English language arts (ELA)” encompass for the ACT and PreACT score? Will ISBE calculate proficiency rates for the individual test sections within ELA? Why is the Writing portion of the ACT required, and why is it included in ELA composite scores?

The state is federally required to assess students and report proficiency rates by content area: ELA, math, and science, so Illinois established cut scores for the ELA content area as a whole and not for the individual test sections of English, reading, and writing. States are also required to assess their adopted learning standards. The high school assessment that is used to measure proficiency (ACT with Writing) at grade 11 is expected to assess the full range of Illinois’ ELA learning standards, which includes writing. For this reason, the Writing portion of the ACT is required.

The ELA score for ACT is a weighted rounded average of the three English, reading and writing sections. The writing score is transformed into a 1-36 score to weight it equally with English and reading. The [ACT Technical Manual](#) (Chapter 6) provides additional information on the calculation of the ELA score.

For purposes of accountability, students that did not complete the required writing component of the ACT will have their ELA score computed using the lowest obtainable scale score for writing, which will be averaged with their existing English and reading scores. Without this adjustment, students who did not complete the writing portion would not receive an ELA score at all, which would negatively impact a school’s participation and proficiency rates.

Illinois administers the PreACT at grades 9 and 10 in order to enable the calculation of a growth score at the high school level, which may become an element in the redesigned accountability system. It also provides high schools useful information on student proficiency earlier, when there is still time to intervene. State law requires that the grade 11 assessment be a college entrance exam, which means ISBE is limited to assessments at grades 9 and 10 that align to that grade 11 assessment. The PreACT Secure assessments¹ do not have a writing component. The ELA score at grades 9 and 10 is the rounded average of the two English and reading sections.

Other Assessment Questions

26. What is the purpose of state assessments?

State assessments ask students to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and understanding on a common measure. Federal education law requires all states to administer summative (meaning, end-of-year) standardized tests in English language arts, math, and science at specific grade levels.

State assessment data allow us to see patterns in performance that should guide school improvement, helping identify areas of strength and opportunity.

Since state assessments are federally required to be summative in nature, capturing how well students have mastered grade-level standards, they are not intended to inform day-to-day classroom instruction.

27. How does this relate to other tests students in Illinois take?

State test results are just one part of a student's academic story. This change better aligns Illinois' benchmarks with other trusted indicators college enrollment, Advanced Placement, and dual credit course performance. It helps ensure that students who succeed in those areas are reflected accurately in their state assessment results.

28. Will ACCESS exit criteria be reevaluated like the proficiency levels were?

The ACCESS test will undergo a national standard setting in the summer of 2026. Following the establishment of new cut scores, states will have the ability to convene stakeholders to consider adjustments to state-specific exit criteria.

29. Do these changes affect the Dynamic Learning Maps Alternate Assessment (DLM-AA)?

The performance levels for the DLM-AA are established at the consortia level. The new performance levels for IAR, ISA, and ACT will not be applied to the DLM-AA.

30. Do assessments like the Illinois Assessment of Readiness and ACT focus on the same standards from year to year, or do the assessed standards change?

States are required to assess the full breadth and depth of their learning standards. To balance standard coverage with test length, both the IAR and ACT sample the standards. Each year, multiple test forms are created, and while most standards assessed on each form are the same, a few standards assessed on each form are different.

Resources

31. Where can I find the cut scores and score ranges for the new performance levels for the ISA, IAR, and ACT?

You can find the cut scores and score ranges on the [ISBE website](#):

- [ELA Cut Scores and Score Ranges](#)
- [Math Cut Scores and Score Ranges](#)

- [Science Cut Scores and Score Ranges](#)

32. With this change, are there any new resources for schools or educators?

Yes, ISBE created a suite of resources for both schools and families to better understand what the changes taking place. Educators worked in grade-level and subject teams to create practical tools that connect the state test directly to the Illinois Learning Standards. These include Performance Level Descriptors that outline what students should be able to do at each performance level for every standard on the test (available in detailed form for educators and a summary version for families) and Samples to Success that provide real examples of test questions students at each level would be expected to answer correctly.

Additionally, a communications toolkit is available on [ISBE's website](#). The toolkit includes the “New Proficiency Benchmarks: What Families Need to Know” fact sheet, a slide deck and webinar recording, a set of talking points schools can use to help communicate these changes to families, and more.

33. Will ISBE produce similar resources to the PLDs and Samples to Success for grades K-2? How can districts use the existing resources to support alignment between K-2 and grade 3?

Performance Level Descriptors (PLDs) and the Samples to Success were created in close alignment with the assessments at each grade. As there are no statewide standardized assessments in grades K, 1 or 2, we are not able to provide these same resources for those grades. (The Kindergarten Individual Development Survey or KIDS administered in the first 40 days of kindergarten is an observation protocol, not a standardized assessment.) ISBE is exploring ways in which a deep analysis of the range of performance in relationship to the standards that is aligned to classroom performance could be developed instead, but there is not yet a specific timeline for this work. Districts are encouraged to have these conversations locally, and ISBE will be seeking collaborators in the work when it begins.