Understanding the SAT and ACT College Readiness Benchmarks

L. Shane Hall, Ph.D.

At-a-Glance

College readiness refers to the level of preparation a student needs to enroll and succeed – without remediation – in a credit-bearing course at a postsecondary institution (Conley, 2010). This definition, offered by Dr. David Conley of the Education Policy Improvement Center in Oregon, has been adopted by Dallas Independent School District and other school systems and education agencies. Despite broad agreement on the definition of college readiness, there is less unanimity on how to measure it. One widely used measure is student scores on the college admissions tests: the SAT and the ACT. However, there is no consensus as to what scores on these exams signify sufficient preparation for college-level academic material.

The lack of a universally agreed-upon definition of what constitutes college readiness has resulted in various agencies and organizations developing college readiness benchmarks, as measured by student scores on the SAT and ACT. These multiple benchmarks, which show differing levels of college readiness for the same school system and schools, often create confusion for members of the public and even many educators and school administrators.

The purpose of this briefing is to discuss the three major college readiness benchmarks used in the Dallas ISD. It will define the three major benchmarks, and explain their function, as each one has its own purpose and value.

Background

The SAT and ACT are the two major admissions tests used by colleges and universities across the United States. College Board developed and administers the SAT, while American College Testing, or ACT, developed and administers the ACT. Although many Dallas ISD students take both tests, more take the SAT than the ACT. The SAT tests verbal and quantitative reasoning skills, and more recently has added a test of writing skills. Scale scores on each section can range from a low of 200 to a high of 800, for a combined maximum score of 2400. Despite the addition of the writing section of the test, the benchmarks discussed in this report are limited to only the reading and mathematics sections, meaning combined scale scores can range from a minimum of 400 to a maximum of 1600.

The ACT measures student achievement related to high school curricula, assessing skills in English, mathematics, reading, and science. Scale scores on the ACT range from a low of 1 to a high of 36. The composite score is the average of these four tests and is the score used for the benchmarks discussed in this briefing.

The table below displays the three major college readiness benchmarks used in the Dallas ISD. The scores shown are the minimum levels at which students are considered college-ready.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benchmark</th>
<th>ACT</th>
<th>SAT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Destination 2020</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TSI</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AEIS</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Destination 2020

Destination 2020: Destination 2020 is the Dallas ISD’s plan for improvement. This district benchmark measures the extent to which students and schools are meeting Dallas ISD targets for student academic performance and college readiness. The benchmark also is an element of high school principal evaluations.

Texas Success Initiative

Texas institutions of higher education use the TSI benchmark to help determine student readiness for college-level work. Students who meet or exceed the TSI are considered ready for the demands of college-level courses and are exempt from placement testing. Students who do not meet the TSI standard must take placement tests. Students who score below a certain level on placement tests often must take remedial courses. Remedial classes are not credit-bearing and do not count toward a degree or certificate. The Accuplacer is the most commonly used placement test in many Texas colleges and universities.

Academic Excellence Indicator System

The AEIS is the highest of the three benchmarks discussed in this briefing. This benchmark is the criterion score set by the Texas Education Agency for each test and is part of the school and district “report cards” issued by the State of Texas to determine the extent to which schools and districts meet state standards for student academic performance and other metrics.
For more information, contact L. Shane Hall at 972-925-6496 or by email at ShHall@dallasisd.org.