ARE NORTH DAKOTA HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES PREPARED FOR COLLEGE?

Most North Dakota high school students graduate on time (87% in 2016-17)[1] and many pursue post-high school education. In Fall 2016, nearly three-fourths of recent high school graduates were enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions (72% or 4,877 students)[2].

In preparation for college, most North Dakota students take the ACT test which is a national college admissions examination. ACT program scores are designed to predict a student's potential for success in college and help guide students as they navigate the transition into higher education. Nearly every North Dakota high school graduate takes the ACT test due to a law passed by the 2009 North Dakota Legislative Assembly, making the exam a requirement. As an alternative to the ACT exam, students have the option of taking the WorkKeys assessment, which is a job skills assessment system measuring real-world skills that employers believe are critical to job success.

Of the 2017 high school graduates in North Dakota who were tested, the average ACT composite score was 20.3 out of a possible 36. Nationally, the average composite score for 2017 graduates was slightly higher at 21.0[3]. Six counties in the state had scores at or above the national average, ranging from 21.0 to 22.8 (Table 1)[4].

In addition to the overall score, ACT has developed benchmarks to measure what it takes to be successful in standard first-year college courses in the areas of English, math, reading, and science. A benchmark score is the minimum score needed on an ACT subject-area test to indicate a 50 percent chance of obtaining a B or higher or about a 75 percent chance of obtaining a C or higher in the corresponding credit-bearing college courses, which include English composition, algebra, social sciences, and biology.

FIGURE 1. PERCENT OF ACT-TESTED 2017 HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES READY FOR COLLEGE COURSES: NORTH DAKOTA & UNITED STATES[3]

According to these benchmarks, 56 percent of ACT-tested 2017 North Dakota high school graduates were ready for college English, 40 percent were ready for college math, 40 percent were ready for college reading, and 33 percent were ready for college science. About one in five students met all four benchmarks (22%) (Figure 1). Nationally, 27 percent of graduates were ready for all four courses[3]. Wells and Pierce counties led the state with more than one-third of students meeting all four benchmarks (38 percent, each) (Figure 2)[4].

College readiness scores vary considerably by race in North Dakota. White and Asian graduates outperformed all other racial groups in meeting key benchmarks for college readiness in 2017. American Indian and black students were much less likely than their peers to meet all four key college readiness benchmarks[3].

ACT research shows that students who take rigorous or core curricula are more prepared to graduate from high school ready for college. In all four subjects, North Dakota students who take the ACT recommended core curriculum (i.e., four years of English; three years each of math, social studies, and science) are more likely to be ready for college or career than those who do not[5]. In addition, ACT research finds that becoming college and career ready is a process that begins early in a child's life. Students who are on target academically in the eighth grade face fewer obstacles in high school and are more likely to be prepared for college than students who are not[6].

In a labor market transformed by globalization and technology, employers are requiring higher skills and more than a high school diploma[7]. Students receiving rigorous curricula, ongoing college and career planning, and necessary supports to succeed in school are better positioned to succeed in college and 21st century careers.

FIGURE 2. PERCENT OF ACT-TESTED 2017 NORTH DAKOTA HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES READY FOR COLLEGE-LEVEL COURSES IN ENGLISH, MATH, READING, AND SCIENCE[3,4]
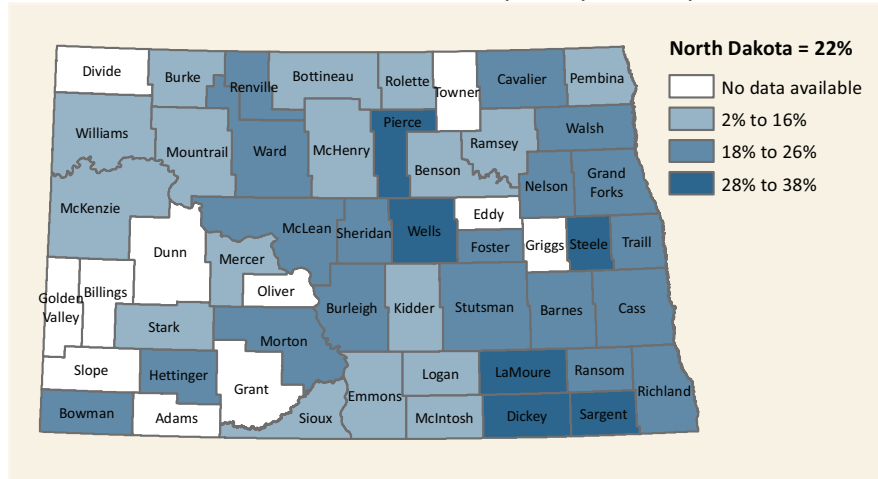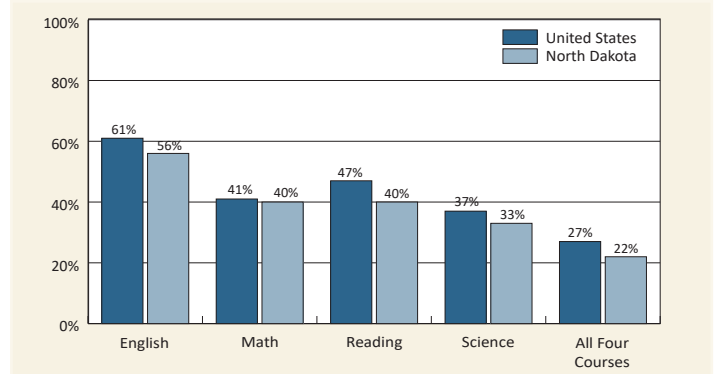

North Dakota = 22%

- No data available
- 2% to 16%
- 18% to 26%
- 28% to 38%

[1]ND Department of Public Instruction, ND Insights Dashboard. Four-Year On-Time Graduation Rates. Available from https://bit.ly/2O0jqlU. [2]U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 2017 Digest of Education Statistics. Table 309.20. Available from https://bit.ly/2LSy1ST. [3]ACT, Inc., *ACT Profile Report - North Dakota Graduating Class of 2017*. Available from http://www.act.org. [4]ACT, Inc. special request. [5]ACT, Inc., *The Condition of College and Career Readiness 2017 - North Dakota Graduating Class of 2017*. Available from http://www.act.org. [6]ACT, Inc., 2014. *The forgotten middle: ensuring that all students are on target for college and career readiness before high school*. Available from http://www.act.org. [7]Holzer, H.J., & Lerman, R.I., 2007. *America's forgotten middle-skill jobs: Education and training requirements in the next decade and beyond*. Washington, DC: Workforce Alliance. Available from http://urbn.is/1J5vzLU.

TABLE 1. ACT-TESTED 2017 HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES MEETING ACT COLLEGE-READINESS BENCHMARKS[3,4]

Area	Composite ACT Score (out of 36)	Percent of ACT-Tested 2017 Graduates Meeting ACT College-Readiness Benchmarks				
		English (Benchmark = 18)	Math (Benchmark=22)	Reading (Benchmark=21)	Science (Benchmark=24)	Meeting All Four ACT Benchmarks
United States	21.0	61.0%	41.0%	47.0%	37.0%	27.0%
North Dakota	20.3	56.0%	40.0%	40.0%	33.0%	22.0%
Adams	--	--	--	--	--	--
Barnes	20.1	64.0%	36.0%	47.0%	27.0%	19.0%
Benson	16.6	29.0%	20.0%	15.0%	14.0%	8.0%
Billings	--	--	--	--	--	--
Bottineau	18.4	43.0%	12.0%	31.0%	12.0%	8.0%
Bowman	20.4	67.0%	35.0%	42.0%	37.0%	26.0%
Burke	19.6	48.0%	26.0%	37.0%	22.0%	11.0%
Burleigh	20.5	58.0%	40.0%	41.0%	33.0%	21.0%
Cass	20.6	57.0%	45.0%	43.0%	38.0%	26.0%
Cavalier	19.4	50.0%	28.0%	35.0%	30.0%	20.0%
Dickey	20.6	61.0%	41.0%	44.0%	37.0%	28.0%
Divide	--	--	--	--	--	--
Dunn	--	--	--	--	--	--
Eddy	--	--	--	--	--	--
Emmons	20.0	61.0%	21.0%	52.0%	15.0%	9.0%
Foster	20.7	62.0%	49.0%	42.0%	31.0%	24.0%
Golden Valley	--	--	--	--	--	--
Grand Forks	20.6	56.0%	43.0%	40.0%	35.0%	24.0%
Grant	--	--	--	--	--	--
Griggs	--	--	--	--	--	--
Hettinger	20.6	65.0%	26.0%	44.0%	35.0%	21.0%
Kidder	18.2	36.0%	24.0%	30.0%	18.0%	12.0%
LaMoure	21.2	59.0%	45.0%	52.0%	41.0%	34.0%
Logan	21.0	76.0%	55.0%	48.0%	18.0%	9.0%
McHenry	19.4	47.0%	36.0%	34.0%	23.0%	13.0%
McIntosh	19.3	41.0%	36.0%	41.0%	27.0%	9.0%
McKenzie	18.7	42.0%	28.0%	26.0%	20.0%	12.0%
McLean	20.3	54.0%	39.0%	41.0%	35.0%	22.0%
Mercer	19.7	50.0%	39.0%	33.0%	24.0%	16.0%
Morton	19.9	58.0%	35.0%	38.0%	30.0%	21.0%
Mountrail	17.4	33.0%	16.0%	23.0%	7.0%	2.0%
Nelson	19.9	50.0%	43.0%	36.0%	25.0%	18.0%
Oliver	--	--	--	--	--	--
Pembina	19.5	55.0%	33.0%	28.0%	21.0%	12.0%
Pierce	21.7	62.0%	76.0%	51.0%	49.0%	38.0%
Ramsey	19.2	45.0%	37.0%	29.0%	22.0%	16.0%
Ransom	21.0	62.0%	51.0%	45.0%	42.0%	25.0%
Renville	19.9	50.0%	35.0%	41.0%	33.0%	24.0%
Richland	20.8	63.0%	47.0%	42.0%	37.0%	25.0%
Rolette	17.6	33.0%	17.0%	21.0%	13.0%	7.0%
Sargent	20.8	71.0%	44.0%	50.0%	35.0%	29.0%
Sheridan	19.0	50.0%	38.0%	50.0%	25.0%	25.0%
Sioux	14.5	2.0%	2.0%	2.0%	2.0%	2.0%
Slope	--	--	--	--	--	--
Stark	19.5	48.0%	34.0%	30.0%	27.0%	15.0%
Steele	21.7	79.0%	50.0%	58.0%	46.0%	29.0%
Stutsman	20.1	51.0%	40.0%	39.0%	31.0%	23.0%
Towner	--	--	--	--	--	--
Traill	20.7	63.0%	44.0%	44.0%	37.0%	25.0%
Walsh	19.8	46.0%	37.0%	40.0%	26.0%	18.0%
Ward	20.6	59.0%	41.0%	40.0%	34.0%	23.0%
Wells	22.8	79.0%	79.0%	52.0%	69.0%	38.0%
Williams	19.3	48.0%	27.0%	35.0%	23.0%	14.0%

Note: "--" Data are not available.