

ACT test scores drop to lowest in 30 years in pandemic slide

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New students at Bear River High School, in Grass Valley, Calif., gather to see their school schedules during the first morning of school, Tuesday, Aug. 16, 2022, for the 2022-2023 school. ACT test scores made public in a report Wednesday, Oct. 12, 2022, reveal a decline in preparedness for college-level coursework. Credit: Elias Funez/The Union via AP, File

Scores on the ACT college admissions test by this year's high school graduates hit their lowest point in more than 30 years—the latest evidence of the [enormity of learning disruption](#) during the pandemic.

The class of 2022's average ACT composite score was 19.8 out of 36, marking the first time since 1991 that the average score was below 20. What's more, an increasing number of [high school](#) students failed to meet any of the subject-area benchmarks set by the ACT—showing a decline in preparedness for college-level coursework.

The test scores, made public [in a report](#) Wednesday, show 42% of ACT-tested graduates in the class of 2022 met none of the subject benchmarks in English, reading, science and math, which are indicators of how well students are expected to perform in corresponding college courses.

In comparison, 38% of [test takers](#) in 2021 failed to meet any of the benchmarks.

"Academic preparedness is where we are seeing the decline," said Rose Babington, senior director for state partnerships for the ACT. "Every time we see ACT test scores, we are talking about skills and standards, and the prediction of students to be successful and to know the really important information to succeed and persist through their first year of [college courses](#)."

ACT scores have declined steadily in recent years. Still, "the magnitude of the declines this year is particularly alarming," ACT CEO Janet Godwin said in a statement. "We see rapidly growing numbers of seniors leaving high school without meeting college-readiness benchmarks in any of the subjects we measure."

The results offer a lens into systemic inequities in education, in place well before the pandemic shuttered schools and colleges temporarily

waived testing requirements. For example, students without access to rigorous high school curriculum suffered more setbacks during pandemic disruptions, Babington said. Those students are from [rural areas](#), come from [low-income families](#) and are often students of color.

The number of students taking the ACT has declined 30% since 2018, as graduates increasingly forgo college and some universities no longer require admissions tests. But participation plunged 37% among Black students, with 154,000 taking the test this year.

Standardized tests such as the ACT have faced growing concerns that they're unfair to minority and low-income students, as students with access to expensive test prep or advanced courses often perform better.

Babington defended the test as a measure of college readiness. "Now more than ever, the last few years have shown us the importance of having high-quality data to help inform how we support students," Babington said.

Test scores now are optional for first-year [student](#) admission at many institutions. Some colleges, such as the University of California system, even opt for a test-blind policy, where scores are not considered even if submitted.

But many students still take the tests, hoping to get an edge in admissions by submitting their scores. Tyrone Jordan, a freshman at test-optional Arizona State University, said he took the ACT and the SAT to get ahead of other students and help him receive scholarships.

Jordan, who wants to pursue [mechanical engineering](#), said he thinks his rigorous schedule at Tempe Preparatory Academy prepared him for college, and the [standardized tests](#) helped support him and his family financially.

"All the test did for me was give me extra financial money," Jordan said.

While Jordan was always planning to take the test, many students struggle with access or choose not to take the [test](#) since their universities of choice no longer require it. In Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nevada, Tennessee and Wyoming, everyone is tested.

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