

About CEI

CEI's mission is to **champion, empower, and ignite** Colorado leaders to deliver on the promise of public education to develop thriving young people and flourishing communities.

We have built our reputation through three primary roles: implementation expert, strategic partner, and statewide convener.

About This Series

CEI is publishing a new series of Accountability EdPapers throughout 2024 to share lessons, reflections, and recommendations about the future of high school accountability in Colorado.

EdPapers will explore:

- Honoring local relevance
- Prioritizing actionable and timely data
- Rethinking the role of high-stakes testing
- Promoting cross-system learning and transparency
- Keeping equity at the forefront

2024 Accountability EdPapers: Measuring What Matters: A More Balanced Approach to Standardized Testing

April 2024

This paper is the third in our new series of 2024 Accountability EdPapers.

Our EdPaper series thus far has focused on the opportunity to reimagine high school accountability in Colorado, and a critical component of this work requires us to make room in our accountability framework to capture robust measures of student achievement, growth, and college and career readiness. [Last month](#), we shared our stance that it is critical to measure what matters in a student's high school experience. We believe there is an important place for the SAT in school quality ratings, but other quality ratings should be amplified as well. If our aim is to promote college *and* career readiness without ruling one out or overvaluing another, we must make space for a performance framework as holistic as the skills we want our students to master as they prepare for life after high school.

Colorado's current framework for high school performance captures three indicators:

- *Achievement* is marked by students' Evidence-Based Reading and Writing and Math PSAT scores, along with Colorado Measures of Academic Success results in 11th grade Science only, and is weighted at 30 percent of the total framework composite score.
- *Growth* in the high school framework is measured from the PSAT to SAT, and using ACCESS test scores for students who are learning the English language. This indicator is weighted at 40 percent of the total framework score.
- Finally, *Postsecondary Workforce Readiness (PWR)* is weighted at 30 percent of the total framework score. The PWR indicator measures five factors: dropout rate, graduation rate, SAT - Evidence-Based Reading and Writing, SAT - Math, and Matriculation, reflecting the percentage of graduates who either enlisted or received a credential/diploma during high school, or those who enrolled after high school in a Career and Technical Education program, two- or four-year degree program, or military option.¹

The PWR indicator has become a primary lever in this opportunity to redefine meaningful high school experiences in Colorado. When the [HB 22-1215 Task Force](#) released its [final report](#), it included a detailed recommendation to reframe the PWR indicator to make room for broader measures of success. This recommendation was largely directed at the current [HB 23-1241 Task Force](#) for their consideration. P/SAT measurements at the center of this conversation, recognizing that weighting this assessment in all three indicators — achievement, growth, and PWR — leads it to comprise an outweighed percentage of a school's or district's rating. The appearance of P/SAT performance (as opposed to as part of a growth metric) in both PWR and Achievement is unique; we are unaware of any other state that measures SAT performance repeatedly in this way.

Colorado's PWR conversation is not the only space where the value of the SAT is under examination. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, most colleges and universities across the country stopped requiring the test as a requirement for admission, leaning on file reviews that consider high school GPA, school-based experiences and course load, extracurricular activities, and personal narrative.

While the broad impetus for this decision may have been linked to the pandemic, some reports indicated that test-optional or test-blind admissions policies led to a more diverse pool of applicants, specifically students furthest from opportunity who may have perceived that the SAT or ACT could be a barrier to entry. Indeed, some institutions began to move toward this practice even prior to the pandemic for this reason.

However, some of the more elite institutions have begun to reverse course, citing findings that the diversity of admitted students began to decrease with the elimination of the testing requirement. While research is mixed and focused largely on the nation's elite institutions, we agree that a standardized test can sometimes create world-opening opportunities when a student furthest from opportunity, who may otherwise have been overlooked by systems not specifically designed to support their success, does well.

One example of this lives right here in Colorado's own higher education leadership. Tony Frank, current chancellor of the Colorado State University System, shares an example of how a standardized test changed his own trajectory. Raised in a small town in Illinois in a family with a legacy of dairy farming, his path seemed predetermined until he took the ACT and achieved eye-opening scores in the upper percentile. From there, his teachers and counselors encouraged him to take a wider view of the possibilities available to him. He went on to achieve a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree and continued his career in academia, becoming the president and now chancellor of the CSU System.

Chancellor Frank, like many leaders in higher education today, knows that students can thrive in higher education even without strong test performance, and that an overreliance on test scores risks creating an even deeper social divide in an already fraught system. Expensive test preparation courses and materials are often only available to students who have the financial means to afford them, so students seeking to enroll in four-year institutions may have to find different ways to set their applications apart. But these same students often lack the resources to engage in other opportunities, including expensive extracurricular activities, travel, or out-of-school internships that may compete with demands on their after-school time that might otherwise be dedicated to working.

These inequities call on the promise of public education to deliver equitable and rich experiences while students are still in high school, including meaningful work-based learning opportunities, like credit-bearing internships; concurrent enrollment opportunities to demonstrate an aptitude for academic rigor; or a robust capstone to demonstrate readiness for life after high school. Schools across Colorado are creating rich pathways to support any path a student might wish to pursue without closing any doors of opportunity. That said, even great school and system leaders become weary when the efforts they've made to provide these robust offerings continue to go unrecognized in our state's school quality ratings.

To return to where we began, we believe the solution is to measure what matters, not just what is most easily quantified. Colorado has the opportunity now to balance our framework to reflect and incentivize the skills and experiences all students deserve. Maintaining the SAT as a critical indicator of achievement will continue to recognize that the SAT is a measure of performance, and potentially an indicator of college success. At the same time, removing SAT from the PWR indicator will leave space to measure other valuable skills and experiences that a student may develop during a high-quality high school experience, including opportunities that reflect the values of local school districts and the many ways a student can be prepared for success after high school. It is

¹ See Colorado Department of Education Postsecondary Workforce Readiness Fact Sheet, [2024 Postsecondary Workforce Readiness Fact Sheet.docx \(state.co.us\)](#)

easier to enter these policy debates with an “all or nothing” approach to standardized testing, but we believe a “both and” approach better reflects what high school students need and want in their high school experience.

We are optimistic about Colorado’s next steps on this front, working with the 1241 Task Force and the many leaders engaged in this work, particularly as the Task Force has suggested modeling different PWR formulas to understand how a new, more balanced PWR measurement would impact schools and districts across the state. We look forward to continuing this conversation as this opportunity becomes more tangible, and would love for you to join us. Please don’t hesitate to share your thoughts with Amber Elias, CEI’s Vice President of Policy and Partnership, at aelias@coloradoedinitiative.org.