

North Carolina Implements a Comprehensive Approach to College and Career Readiness

The Organization

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (DPI), with emphasis on school accountability and Career and Technical Education (CTE)

The Challenge

“Every child deserves an education that properly prepares him or her for the next big steps after graduation—college, career, and adulthood,” according to the state's DPI website.

The Solution

Implement a comprehensive suite of ACT solutions to diagnose, monitor, and measure college and career readiness:

- ACT Explore® in Grade 8
- ACT Plan® in Grade 10
- the ACT® college readiness assessment in Grade 11
- ACT WorkKeys® assessments leading to an ACT-registered Career Readiness Certificate (CRC) for Career & Technical Education students in Grade 12

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Tammy Howard
North Carolina Department
of Public Instruction

School Accountability

Overview

Educational achievement has been a priority for the state for many years. Tammy Howard, PhD, is director of Accountability Services for North Carolina DPI. Dr. Howard says the intent of accountability is to hold districts and schools accountable for the performance of their students and to provide a way to identify schools and districts most in need of intervention and assistance. For a 15-year period beginning with the 1997–1998 school year, accountability measures were implemented under a statewide program referred to as “The ABCs of Public Education.” The acronym stood for Accountability, teaching the Basics, and local Control. Schools were assigned a status based on test scores, and later, measures of improvement or progress in raising those scores were added.

Howard says North Carolina DPI views district and school excellence through a lens referred to as a performance composite. The composite includes all test scores in a particular school divided into the total number of proficient scores in that school. Scores include end-of-course and end-of-year tests.

Beginning with the 2012–2013 school year, accountability measures include end-of-course and end-of-year tests, the ACT test, graduation rates, math course rigor (successful completion of Algebra II or an equivalent course), and ACT WorkKeys assessments for senior CTE students. Starting in 2013–2014 these indicators will be used to assign schools an A, B, C, D, or F letter grade based on aggregate performance.

North Carolina uses ACT Explore and ACT Plan as diagnostic tools in Grades 8 and 10, but the scores are not included in accountability measures for the state. Each of these tests is aligned to Common

Core standards and measures academic progress in the same four subject matter areas as the ACT test taken in Grade 11. They are designed to benchmark progress toward achieving college and career readiness providing an early view of preparedness.

Under the older rating system, one school might be labeled a “School of Distinction” while another was called a “School of Excellence.” Howard says, “Unless you were very familiar with the terms, it would be difficult to distinguish which of those two schools was performing better. The new system, with familiar report card-style grades, will be simpler for most individuals. However there will continue to be a need for all of the data to be reviewed for the complete picture of a school.”

The Communications Challenge

Howard says, “When our State Board of Education decided to begin administering the ACT test to all juniors, it really was rather aspirational from an accountability point of view. When you move from having 20,000 students take a college entrance exam to having 100,000 scores each year, it can create a communications challenge. Rather than expecting 2% or 3% increases each year, we’re now looking for one- or two-tenths of a point progress from year to year.”

Summary

“We think this is a more holistic approach to measuring college and career readiness,” says Howard. “Our hope is that using the ACT suite beginning in Grade 8 will help students, parents, and educators identify strengths and weaknesses throughout their school years. We want to be sure we aren’t just graduating students—which is an admirable goal—we want to be sure that when they leave us, they are college and career ready.”

Career & Technical Education

Overview

Jo Anne Honeycutt directs North Carolina's Career & Technical Education (CTE) division within the state's Department of Public Instruction. Currently 16 career cluster areas and about 180 state-approved CTE courses are offered to high school students.

The division's stated mission is to "empower all students to be successful citizens, workers, and leaders in a global economy." Honeycutt sees CTE initiatives as "a way to help students prepare to be career, college, and community ready, by providing relevant, contextual, and technical experiences designed to help students decide what they might want to pursue after high school." The idea is to provide "work-based learning" experiences, starting in middle school, so students really begin to see what the workplace is like.

Exposure to the world of work begins as early as Grades 7 and 8. In 2013, nearly 35,000 North Carolina Grade 8 students participated in "Students at Work," an initiative with this tagline: *Relevance in the classroom; preparedness in the workplace.* A partnership with the North Carolina Business Committee for Education, this program offers job shadowing opportunities to students in Grade 8 across the state.

As students move through the final four or five years of school toward graduation, they may tour local work sites, listen to classroom presentations by employers, enroll in structured internships, or participate in registered apprenticeships. Some of these opportunities qualify for dual credit, meaning the students earn transferrable college credit while still in high school at no cost to them or their families.

"Generally, we like to see students making choices as they enter high school," says

Honeycutt. She is quick to point out, "Selection of a CTE pathway does not mean that a student will not take the academic core subjects that would allow him or her to have many choices after high school, including enrolling as a full-time student in a college or university." Under the recently adopted "Future Ready" core requirements in North Carolina, all students—including those who choose a CTE path—are required to take math and English coursework that makes them competitive for postsecondary placement. "For those who do choose a CTE path, they would also leave with some industry-standard credentials and technical studies, so we think it's a good way to ensure students have a broad array of choices after they graduate."

The Challenge

More than 500,000 North Carolina high school students are served by CTE programs each year. Between 35,000 and 40,000 of these students are known as "CTE Concentrators," meaning they have chosen to pursue 4 units of credit in a CTE cluster area, and one of those courses must be an advanced course. The challenge is to reach these students early—in Grades 7, 8, and 9—and ensure they understand the course selection process and can complete all requirements before graduation. Early planning also increases the opportunity for students to take advantage of dual enrollment programs in partnership with the state's community college system. In addition, it's essential that each student is prepared with the essential foundational skills to succeed in the workplace.

Finding A Solution

DPI leadership was already investing in ACT solutions for Grades 8 and 10 by using ACT Explore and ACT Plan as diagnostic assessments, and administering the ACT to all high school juniors. They chose to add a requirement that all seniors

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North Carolina Career &
Technical Education Division

enrolled in CTE programs take the three ACT WorkKeys assessments required for an ACT-registered Career Readiness Certificate. The requirements for the state CRC are identical to the ACT National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC) recognized by employers nationwide and across many industry sectors. North Carolina CRCs issued under the state's DPI contract with ACT are registered in the ACT database and therefore verifiable online by prospective employers. In addition, students graduating with a CRC have an additional credential to document the foundational workplace skills employers value in reading, math, and locating information.

Implementation

Honeycutt's office opted to offer ACT WorkKeys testing online rather than with paper and pencil. In February 2012, the first year of implementation, about half of the 35,000 ACT WorkKeys examinees took the assessments on a computer. One year later, 86% were tested online. This was the largest computer-based testing deployment in high schools ACT has ever conducted. Honeycutt explains that CTE students currently use a web-based product for formative and summative assessments as part of the CTE curriculum, so students are familiar with online testing. Getting immediate results on each assessment was also an attractive benefit.

Outcomes

- Year One (2011–2012): Of the 35,325 seniors tested, 29,931 (85%) earned an ACT-registered CRC. Of the Certificates awarded, 49% were Silver-level and 13% were Gold.
- Year Two (2012–2013): Of the 35,135 seniors tested, 30,513 (87%) earned an ACT-registered CRC. Of the Certificates awarded, 50% were Silver-level and 16% were Gold.

“The percentage of students earning each level mirrors the national average for examinees of all ages,” says Honeycutt. “We are particularly proud of the progress from our first to our second year: the number of Certificates earned increased even though we tested slightly fewer students, and we’re seeing a decrease in Bronze-level and an increase in Gold-level Certificates. Our goal is to have every CTE student earn a Silver-level or above ACT-registered CRC, as that represents the broadest range of possible choices for post-high school success. In fact, Bronze-level Certificates aren’t even counted for school accountability purposes, so higher-level Certificates are very important to us and to the long-term marketability of our students.”

As required by Perkins legislation, CTE Concentrators are followed after high school graduation. “We survey them six months after graduation to see if they are employed, in military service, or in postsecondary education or advanced training. For the most recent graduating class, 94% were involved in one or more of these activities,” says Honeycutt.

ACT Work Ready Communities (WRC) Initiative

The ACT Work Ready Communities [WRC] initiative was created to empower states, regions, and counties with data, process, and tools to help drive economic growth. An early adopter of this initiative, North Carolina stepped up as a participating state in June 2013.

Each month, ACT posts National Career Readiness Certificate data, at the county level, on the WRC website along with the number of employers who recognize the NCRC. Since January 2006, nearly 180,000 individuals in North Carolina have earned ACT-registered Career Readiness Certificates, and nearly 700 detailed job

profiles have been completed to analyze the key tasks and skill levels for particular jobs. The community college system in North Carolina has administered ACT WorkKeys assessments for many years.

The North Carolina Work Ready Communities team consists of a representative from the Governor's Office, as well as state, regional, and local agencies representing education, workforce, commerce, and chambers of commerce. Honeycutt leads the WRC team for her state and she has reached out to regional and local leaders to provide input to the state effort. She anticipates that as employers across the state sign letters of commitment to recognize the Certificate in their hiring and promotion processes, students and job seekers of any age will see increased value in performing well on their WorkKeys assessments to earn higher-level Certificates.

A key benefit of WRC adoption—documented proof of local workforce quality—will be a tremendous economic development asset for communities. ■

Education Matters In Catawba Valley

Overview

A partnership between business, government, and education, this Catawba County initiative aims to increase the value of education and educational attainment across this western North Carolina county.

Tracy Hall has been the executive director of Education Matters since its inception in 2009. She explains that the initiative was the brainchild of Dr. Garrett Hinshaw, president of Catawba Valley Community College. Educators, employers, and civic organizations were all united in their concern about the future workforce, but were unsure how to work together to improve the situation. Dr. Hinshaw felt that to raise the bar on educational attainment, a concrete plan was needed to define commitments by all partners.

Through the commitment of each partner, students attending any of the county's eight middle schools or nine high schools can better plan for their future through an awareness of career opportunities and knowledge of the training and education needed to successfully gain employment.

The Role Of Each Partner

As stated on the Education Matters website, "Business, local government, and education systems believe in the strength of an educated workforce. Studies consistently demonstrate that individuals who are better educated are more prepared to withstand economic downturns, increase their earnings potential over their lifetimes, and are more productive in the workplace."

Business Partners

Area businesses may select a level of commitment: Gold, Silver, or Bronze. Employers selecting the Gold and Silver levels make a commitment not to hire anyone 25 years of age or younger who has not earned a high school diploma or GED; Bronze-level employers agree to prefer hiring only those with a diploma or GED. As Hall explains, "This empowers our school systems to be able to say to students, 'Look at this list of more than 160 area employers. They don't want you to drop out of high school. In fact they expect you to graduate and they won't hire you without a diploma or a GED! This impactful message can help improve our high school completion rate.'"

Silver- and Gold-level committed employers also agree to share career information directly with students. That may take the form of guest speakers in the classroom, job shadowing, tours of the workplace, or internships and apprenticeships. If an educator is looking for a guest speaker from the business community on a particular topic, the teacher can contact Hall and she will approach business partners to secure a volunteer.

(continued)

Local Government

The same hiring and participation requirements applied to business partners have been adopted by local government. In addition:

- Foster parents are now required to have a high school diploma or GED to be approved. The idea is to ensure that foster parents encourage children in their care to value education.
- Businesses wishing to secure incentive dollars for starting a new facility or expanding an existing facility must sign on as partners of Education Matters. That requirement ensures that new employers will help share the responsibility for career education opportunities with long-term businesses in the county.

Education Partners

Hall works with the CTE directors from the three school districts in the county to implement school-related commitments:

- *Every student in Grade 10* has access to ACT KeyTrain[®] software to build their workplace skills and take practice assessments.
- *Every student in Grade 11* creates a Career & College Ready Portfolio containing items such as a resume, cover letter, list of career goals, transcripts, awards received, letters of recommendation, and newspaper clippings of honors received. Created during English class, this binder of materials is intended to document skills and leadership for prospective employers.
- *Every student in Grade 12* takes ACT WorkKeys assessments online in February of their senior year to earn an ACT-registered Career Readiness Certificate to add to the portfolio. And many will also attend a Career Prep Conference to participate in employment workshops and practice their interviewing skills with employer volunteers.

Sample Initiatives

Hall has implemented a number of ways to create opportunities for interactions between students and area employers. Two of them are described below.

EXTREME STEM Tour for Students in Grade 8

The purpose is to help every student in Grade 8 learn about STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) careers through behind-the-scenes tours in business and industry while also learning about the education and training to prepare for STEM careers at area colleges. Nearly 35 employers and educational institutions are actively participating.

According to Hall, in the last 18 months, 3,250 students in Grade 8 have been able to go on behind-the-scenes field trips to businesses that typically don't allow minors to visit. Then the students visit the community college to learn about the training and classes that match up with the STEM fields they've just seen in action. "These experiences help students see the relevance of the coursework they are taking in school. It helps the curriculum come alive. Teachers can then refer to real-life examples like "the way medicine is dosed requires algebra. At General Dynamics where they make satellite communication products, the geometric principles of a parabola are essential!"

Hall adds, "These students are getting ready to select their high school courses within a few months, so if they know about these career opportunities now, they may be more willing to take higher levels of math, science, and selected CTE courses like engineering technologies or drafting."

Career Prep Conference for Grade 12 Students

The purpose is to help seniors gain employability skills prior to graduation. Students attend workshops and participate in mock interviews conducted by business partners with direction from local human resource professional associations and college human resource development staff members.

The half-day conference experience involves six rotations. Business partners conduct mock one-on-one interviews using 10 predetermined general questions and provide feedback on the portfolios presented by students. College and high school career development coordinators provide team-based activities designed to help students understand the resources available to them as they choose a career and prepare for it. Representatives from human resource organizations lead workshops on interviewing skills and applying for positions in a competitive labor market. Members of an organization called the Hickory Young Professionals meet with students to share information about the career-related challenges they faced upon high school and college graduation. And a mini college fair is held to help students learn about local education and training opportunities.

Students Impacted By Education Matters

Hall provided some results for the 2012–2013 school year. In total, 5,850 Catawba County students were involved:

- 3,257 students in Grade 8 participated in the *EXTREME* STEM Tour.
- 1,712 high school sophomores used ACT KeyTrain curriculum and practice assessments.
- 450 high school juniors created Career & College Ready Portfolios.
- 234 high school seniors in the pilot group took the ACT WorkKeys assessments and earned an ACT-registered Career Readiness Certificate with the average scoring at the Silver level.
- 150 high school seniors attended the Career Prep Conference to gain employability skills.
- 85 seniors from the early college high school attended a business leader forum to learn about various career areas.

Recommendations

Whether the initiative is countywide or statewide, Hall recommends, “You must have someone representing government, the community college system (as testing centers), K–12 education, economic development, and civic organizations like the Chamber. You need everyone working together—all parties must take an active seat at the table.”

Hall continues, “But then you need a person unaffiliated with any one partner group who can be the ‘glue’ for all those separate entities and isn’t influenced or biased by any one organization. And that person must be dedicated fulltime to the initiative—it can’t be an add-on to an existing job.”

Summary

Hall is pleased with the progress thus far, but sees more work to do, particular with getting broader involvement across the business community. “It’s a whole new way of exposing young people to career opportunities. They see the value of education, their coursework becomes more relevant, and they can better envision a future for themselves.” She is also pleased that every student participates in the Education Matters initiative. “All students can benefit, no matter their history or their goals for the future.”

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