

# Examining Benefits of School-Day ACT® Senior Retesting

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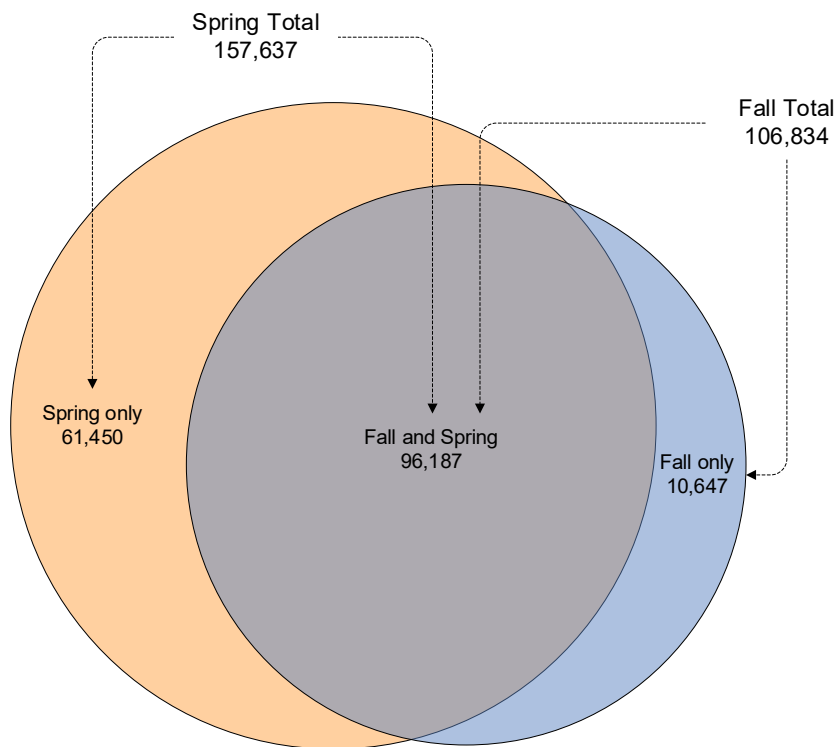
## Summary

States or districts can offer their seniors an ACT® retest on a school day in the fall. Senior retesting (also called a “senior retake”) provides students with an additional opportunity to take the ACT to demonstrate their readiness for college and careers. For some students who are unable to test in the spring, it is their only state and district-funded testing opportunity. There are at least four types of benefits for states and districts that adopt senior retesting:

- Increase in access to senior retesting for students from underserved groups
- Increase in postsecondary qualifications and financial aid, including in holistic admissions processes
- Decrease in test anxiety and increase in motivation for learning
- Support for research and evaluation

## Senior Retesting by the Numbers

We recently examined data for the 11th-grade cohort of Spring 2022, considering only those schools that provided school-day testing in both the spring (11th grade) and fall (12th grade). Only schools that had a retest rate of at least 10% were included. This means that, among all students tested in the spring of 11th grade, at least 10% also tested in the fall of 12th grade. Over 1,300 schools in 40 states that tested 168,284 students were included. For 38% of these schools, the retest rate was less than 50%, suggesting that the senior retest was optional at many schools. Figure 1 shows the number of students tested in spring, fall, and at both time points.

**Figure 1.** Number of Students Tested in 2022 Senior Retesting Programs

The overall retest rate for the schools included in the sample was 61%, and 90% of the students who tested in the fall also tested in the spring. Note that the senior retest provided the only school-day testing opportunity for over 10,000 students who tested in the fall but not the spring.

## Improved Access for Students from Underserved Groups

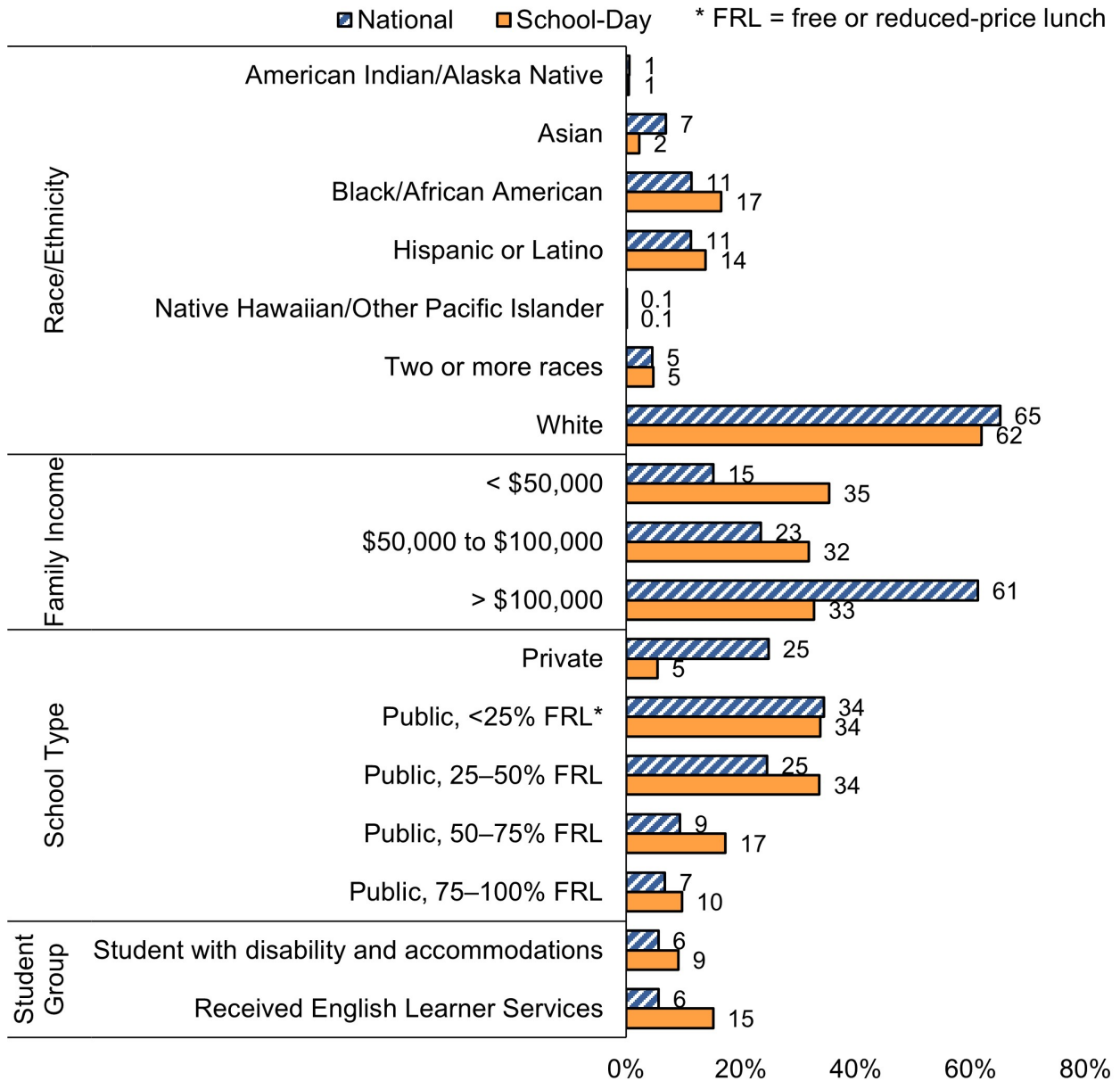
By sponsoring school-day senior retesting, states or districts ensure that all students have the same opportunity to take the ACT test for free. This results in greater representation for students from underserved groups. Figure 2 shows background characteristics of two groups of retesters who tested in spring Grade 11 and fall Grade 12: students from schools without school-day testing who tested and retested on their own through National test dates (and therefore paid for the ACT test or used a fee waiver) and students who tested and retested through State and District school-day testing.

The school-day senior retesting programs were more likely to include students from racial/ethnic groups that are underrepresented in colleges across the United States. Among students in the school-day retester group, 17% were Black and 14% were Hispanic. Among students in the national retester group, 11% were Black and 11% were Hispanic.

The school-day retesters were more likely to come from low-income households. Among students in the school-day retester group, 35% came from families earning less than \$50,000, while 33% came from families earning more than \$100,000. Among students in the national

retester group, 15% came from families earning less than \$50,000 and 61% came from families earning more than \$100,000.

**Figure 2. Demographics of Senior Retesters**



School-day senior retesting programs were more likely to include students from public schools serving more students from low-income backgrounds, relative to private schools and public schools serving fewer students from low-income backgrounds. For example, 5% of school-day retesters attended private schools, while 24% of the national retesters attended private schools. Further, 27% of school-day retesters attended public schools where at least half of the student body was eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, compared to 17% of the national retest group.

The school-day retesting programs were also more likely to include students with disabilities who tested with accommodations (9% of school-day retesters, 6% of national retesters) and students who receive English language services (15% of school-day retesters, 6% of national retesters).

As mentioned earlier, although it is generally referred to as a “retest,” the senior retest provided the first school-day testing opportunity for over 10,000 students. Therefore, it serves an important function by offering access to a group of students who, for a variety of reasons, were not able to test previously. The senior retest was more likely to be the only school-day testing opportunity for:

- Students from certain racial/ethnic groups—African American students made up 23% of the fall-only tested group and 17% of the retest group (those who tested in both spring and fall); Hispanic students made up 25% of the fall-only tested group and 14% of the retest group.
- Students from low-income households—students whose families earn less than \$50,000 per year made up 44% of the fall-only tested group and 35% of the retest group.
- Students from schools serving more low-income students—students from schools with 75% or more of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch made up 21% of the fall-only tested group and 10% of the retest group.

## Increase in Postsecondary Qualifications and Financial Aid

Testing in 12th grade is ideal for obtaining postsecondary qualifications because students have had more time to mature academically and take the high school courses that lead to higher ACT scores. On average, the senior retest occurred seven months after the spring Grade 11 test, and we estimate that four of those months were spent in school and three on summer break.

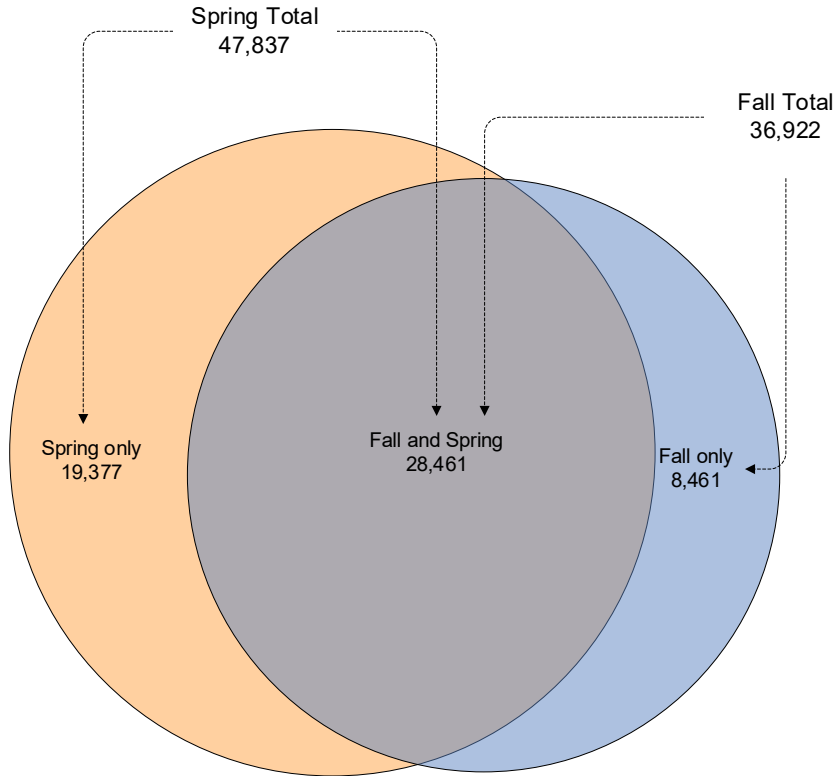
When ACT scores are used for college admissions or awarding scholarships, senior retesting provides students with an additional opportunity to meet qualifying scores. Similarly, when ACT scores are used for college course placement, senior retesting provides an opportunity to earn exemptions from remedial coursework. To examine how much senior retesting increases postsecondary qualifications, we considered two criteria:

- ACT Composite scores of 21 or higher: This qualifies students for a state-funded scholarship in some states and can also be considered a default criterion for college admissions.
- ACT scores at the College Readiness Benchmark or higher for English (18), math (22) reading (22), and science (23): The Benchmarks can be considered defaults for qualifying for credit-bearing courses.

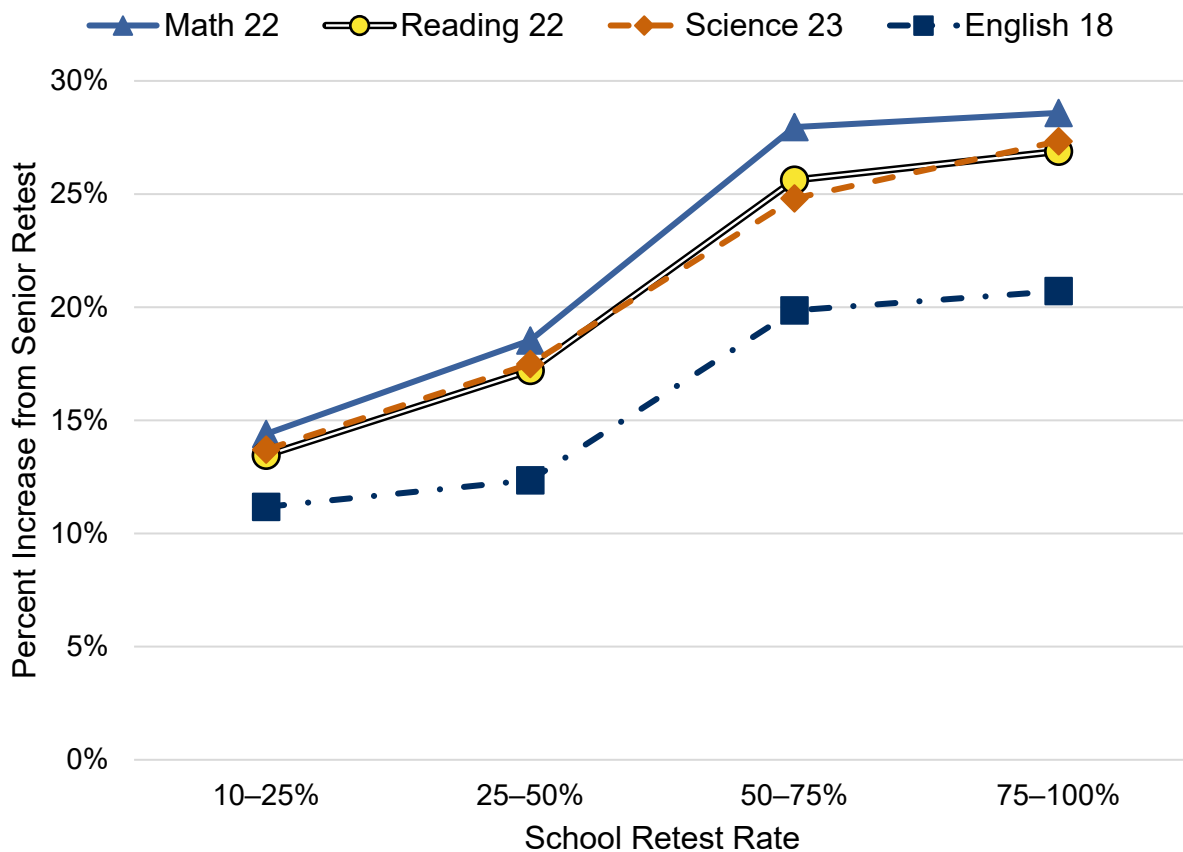
Of the 157,637 students who tested in the spring, 47,837 (30%) had an ACT Composite score of 21 or higher, which could qualify them for a state-funded college scholarship. After the fall

senior retest, an additional 8,461 met the qualifying score (Figure 3). Therefore, the senior retest led to an 18% increase in the number of students meeting the threshold.

**Figure 3.** Number of Students Achieving ACT Composite Score of 21 or Higher



The overall percent increase in the number of students meeting the Benchmarks—qualifying scores for remediation exemptions—was 17% for English, 24% for math, and 23% for reading and science. Schools with higher retest rates had larger increases (see Figure 4). For schools with retest rates of at least 75%, the number of students avoiding remediation in math, reading, and science increased by over 25%, underscoring the value of offering a retest to all students and encouraging them to participate.

**Figure 4.** Percent Increase in Remediation Exemptions

## Less Anxiety, More Time and Motivation for Learning

As the stakes of a test increase, so too does test anxiety (Steedle, 2018). The pressure of performing well on a single test can be overwhelming, so having a second opportunity to take the ACT can reduce test anxiety and improve test-taking confidence. Senior retesting may reduce the pressure on students to perform optimally on their initial attempt if they know that they will have the opportunity to retest. Further, research suggests that becoming familiar with the test's format and length—which can be achieved by retesting—can reduce test anxiety (Steedle, 2018).

Senior retesting could also lead to an increase in motivation for learning. Equipped with the results of their 11th-grade ACT test, motivated students may seek to address areas where they believe they can improve through additional coursework and test preparation. This may also motivate students to continue to take challenging courses during their senior year, even if they are not required for high school graduation. Additional learning that takes place between the spring of 11th grade and fall of 12th grade should improve ACT scores and, more importantly, readiness for college. Because of this potential increase in motivation to continue learning, senior retesting reinforces the idea that learning is a continuous process that extends beyond high school.

## Research and Program Evaluation

When the ACT test is administered at two points in time (e.g., spring of 11th grade and fall of 12th grade), it provides a solid foundation for research into the effectiveness of learning programs that occur between the two tests. For example, summer learning programs that target core academic areas can be evaluated using ACT score gains as one criteria of success. Similarly, ACT score gains can help measure the effectiveness of ACT test preparation programs. Senior retests provide educators with evidence of their students' progress under their instruction, encouraging teachers to adjust their teaching methods and curriculum to better meet their students' needs. Further, schools and districts can use the data from senior retests to assess the effectiveness of their educational programs and make informed decisions about curriculum adjustments and instructional strategies. Senior retesting also affirms a state or district's commitment to learning and reflects a growth mindset.

## Evidence-Backed Benefits

The data from over 1,300 schools in 40 states show that, similar to traditional 11th-grade school-day ACT testing (Allen et al., 2023), ACT senior retest programs provide greater access to testing for students who are from groups that are underrepresented in colleges across the United States. The senior retest may also be the only opportunity to test for students who were absent for the spring test or who moved to the state or district for their senior year.

With greater access to senior retesting, there is an opportunity for more students to meet postsecondary qualifications related to admissions, scholarships, and exemptions from remedial coursework. ACT scores are often used as one of the criteria within holistic admissions processes whereby strict cut scores are not employed, but higher ACT scores can increase the chance of being admitted. Under this model, the senior retest could benefit any students who improve their ACT Composite score, not just those who exceed a certain cut score.

ACT senior retesting empowers students to take ownership of their learning journey and provides them with a second chance to demonstrate their readiness for higher education and the workforce. It aligns with the principles of equity, growth, and lifelong learning, contributing to a more comprehensive and student-centered education system.

## References

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- Steedle, J. (2018). *Keeping your cool: Does test anxiety bias performance on the ACT?* [ACT Research Report 2018-3]. ACT.  
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