



**CASE STUDY**

## **Improving Students' Readiness for College: Homewood-Flossmoor High School, Illinois District 233**

### **Challenge**

Student achievement at Homewood-Flossmoor High School, a suburban Chicago high school in Illinois District 233, was on the decline. In 1999, after a decade of strong, steady results, the school's average ACT composite score dropped 0.6 point (on the 36-point scale) in a single year, from 22.7 to 22.1. This sharp decline caused school officials to stop and reevaluate what they were doing. As Superintendent Laura F. Murray says, "It was a wake-up call that we couldn't ignore."

A review of the facts by Superintendent Murray suggested that a number of factors contributed to the decline.

- The high school's curriculum at that time was driven by electives, rather than by core college prep coursework in the major subject areas. The school was offering a wide selection of elective courses that focused on a variety of topics. But these classes didn't necessarily teach the fundamental skills necessary for college success. "We were the Burger King of high schools," said Murray.
- Students, parents, and even counselors were worried more about students' GPAs than about the types of courses they took when it came to college preparation. The assumption was that colleges wanted students with high grades, never mind that those grades were in classes such as art, drama, and physical education rather than in calculus, trigonometry, and physics.
- At that time, Homewood-Flossmoor High School had no assessment system in place to track academic progress from 9th through 12th grades. As a result, educators did not really know if students were building their skills as they advanced through high school.

Armed with these facts, Superintendent Murray began collecting extensive data. She did a detailed analysis of student course-taking patterns, comparing them to students' achievement on the ACT. And she talked with college admissions officers.

The information she gathered pointed to a clear conclusion: *Rigorous coursework is the key to college readiness.* Students who took advanced math and science courses such as trigonometry and physics routinely performed better on the ACT than those who did not—even if they hadn't earned particularly high grades in those courses. And college admissions officials expressed more interest in what courses a student had taken than in the

student's GPA; earning a B or C in a rigorous course, Murray learned, could count more in a student's favor than earning an A in an easier course.

## **Solution**

Once this conclusion was reached, the changes at Homewood-Flossmoor High School began. Many of the efforts were devoted to informing students, parents, teachers, and counselors about the importance of taking rigorous coursework. The school established a Summer Academy to teach students the skills and cognitive processes they would need to succeed in honors science, mathematics, and English courses. A professional development program for teachers was created. A director of curriculum and instruction and an assistant principal for assessment were hired, and a teacher resource room was created.

A key element in the plan was the adoption of ACT's EPAS™ Educational Planning and Assessment System. EPAS includes EXPLORE® for 8th and 9th graders, PLAN® for 10th graders, and the ACT for 11th and 12th graders. In 1999, the school began administering EXPLORE to all freshmen and PLAN to all sophomores. Later, in 2001, all juniors began taking the ACT as part of the state-mandated Prairie State Achievement Examination (PSAE).

ACT's College Readiness Standards are now being used as a starting point for developing a challenging curriculum for all students. Students' test results and corresponding College Readiness Standards are being fully implemented into the classroom through an electronic database. This computer-based system allows teachers to see each student's scores on the EPAS assessments and then immediately link to the corresponding skills represented by those scores in the College Readiness Standards. The system also gives teachers a direct link to the elements of the College Readiness Standards that provide instructional advice on activities that might help enhance the specific skills in need of improvement.

## **Why EPAS?**

The three programs in EPAS—EXPLORE, PLAN, and the ACT—provide an assessment system that measures student readiness along a continuum of College Readiness Benchmarks. In other words, EPAS allows teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, and students themselves to track academic progress from 9th through 12th grades on skills directly related and linked to college preparation.

In addition, ACT's College Readiness Standards tie directly to EPAS test scores to help teachers and students know exactly what skills each student has and has not yet learned. Teachers can use this information to guide their instruction and tailor the help they provide to individual students. "This has been a really powerful tool for us," said Murray.

In conjunction with assessing academic progress, EPAS helps students plan for their future by providing information on careers that match their interests and skills. Encouraging students to think about possible careers early on allows them to more effectively plan the academic courses they will need to achieve their career goals.

## Results

- **The average ACT score for Homewood-Flossmoor students rose back up to its previous range and has stayed steady since, *even with a substantial increase in the number of students (including the addition of special education students) taking the test.***
  - The percentage of the school's students taking the ACT has risen from 85 percent in 1998 to 97 percent currently.
- **Achievement has improved among students in the lower performance levels (while staying steady among students in the higher performance levels), and the school is seeking to continue this improvement.**
  - The percentage of students earning a score of 14 or lower on the ACT has gone down despite the overall expansion of the test-taking population.
  - In science, both the number and the percentage of students scoring in the bottom quartile have declined.
- **Enrollment in rigorous coursework has gone up across the board.**
  - Participation in advanced and honors courses has quadrupled since 1998.
  - Minority enrollment in advanced courses has stayed consistent with minority enrollment in the school overall.
- **College-going has increased and expanded.**
  - The percentage of Homewood-Flossmoor students going to college has risen from 85 percent to 95 percent.
  - Students are attending a wider variety of colleges than before, with more students going to selective private and out-of-state institutions.
- **In 2002 Homewood-Flossmoor High School was awarded its third U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon Award for Academic Excellence.**
  - Homewood-Flossmoor is one of only two public high schools in Illinois to receive the award three times.
  - Homewood-Flossmoor last received this honor in 1982 and 1996.

■ **In 2002 Homewood-Flossmoor High School had:**

- One National Merit Scholarship winner
- Eight National Merit finalists
- Eight National Achievement finalists
- 22 National Merit commended students