

The ACT Enhancements

Helping School-Day Testing Stakeholders Understand Scores From the Updated Test

Overview

ACT's enhancements to the ACT test introduced in 2025 reflect a careful modernization effort that improves the student testing experience while preserving the assessment's long-standing purpose and meaning. Extensive assessment research confirms that each section of the enhanced ACT measures the same knowledge and skills as the legacy assessment, and scores can continue to be used in the same ways: to inform decisions about achievement, college readiness, admissions, and accountability. Further, because the ACT continues to target key academic knowledge and skills related to college and career readiness, shifts in instruction are not necessary to prepare students for the testing experience.

Because the science section is now optional for students taking the National test on Saturdays, ACT has changed the method for calculating the ACT Composite score:

Legacy Composite Score	New Composite Score
English, math, reading, and science tests (EMRS)	English, math, and reading tests (EMR)
$EMRS = \frac{(E+M+R+S)}{4}$	$EMR = \frac{(E+M+R)}{3}$

Starting in Fall 2025, for all students taking the ACT, including those taking the test through a school-day administration, the ACT Composite score reported will be the rounded average of the student's English, mathematics, and reading scores, and the ACT Superscore will be the rounded average of the student's highest English, mathematics, and reading scores across multiple test administrations. Students taking the enhanced ACT through a state or district school-day test can learn more about their test experience [here](#).

The most visible impact of the updates to the ACT will be small, expected differences between students' new Composite scores and the scores they would have earned under the legacy Composite score calculation. These differences reflect the new Composite score calculation rather than changes in student learning or performance. For the vast majority of students, the impact of the new Composite score calculation will be small: analyses of Spring 2025 contract-tested students show that 9 out of 10 students would have a Composite score under the new calculation that is either equal to or within one point of the Composite score that would have been reported previously. It should be noted that this is within the standard error of measurement for the ACT Composite score scale, which is ± 1 point.

ACT has communicated the information in this brief and other publications prior to the release of the ACT enhancements to support accurate, transparent interpretation of Spring 2026 ACT results. These details are provided to help state and local users understand reporting patterns during the transition period. ACT will continue to monitor outcomes as enhanced test data become available to further support stakeholders in understanding score trends over time.

Background: Enhancements to the ACT

ACT has implemented a series of updates designed to modernize the ACT assessment by shortening the overall test time while increasing the time for each item, and by making the science section optional for students on national testing dates. These changes, referred to as the [ACT enhancements](#), have improved the student testing experience while maintaining the ACT's core purpose: measuring student academic achievement and college and career readiness.

In order to increase the time per item on the enhanced ACT, changes to the number of items for each section (English, Reading, Mathematics, and Science) were necessary. No changes, however, were made to the content or timing of the Writing test, which involves a single, timed essay-writing task. Additionally, ACT made small adjustments to the balance of content across test reporting categories in the multiple-choice sections. Information about the updates to the test can be found in [Reporting Categories Tables: Comparison of the Legacy and Enhanced ACT Test](#) and, for in-depth information, [Design Framework for the ACT Enhancements](#). In making adjustments to the assessment, ACT ensured that each test section continues to measure the same knowledge and skills as the legacy ACT. As a result, instructional shifts are not necessary for preparing students to take the test.

Validity Research on ACT Scores

ACT conducted research to evaluate whether scores from the enhanced ACT support the same interpretations and uses as scores from the legacy ACT test. ACT researchers looked at scores from each section as well as the ACT Composite score and Superscore:

- 1. ACT section scores (English, Math, Reading, Science):** The research on the ACT enhancements at the section level included expert panels for content, fairness, and accessibility in all content areas; cognitive labs with students, including eye tracking, think-aloud protocols, interviews, and surveys; psychometric research, including linking, scaling, mode, timing, predictive validity. Results from these studies confirm the equivalence of the constructs measured by the revised and prior subject sections. This enables scores from the enhanced test to be reported on the same scale and used and interpreted interchangeably with scores from the previous version.
- 2. The ACT Composite score and Superscore:** ACT conducted several Composite score comparability studies. These analyses show that the new Composite score (EMR) is highly correlated (0.99) with the former Composite score (EMRS) and demonstrates similar relationships with other measures of academic performance. This strong association further supports the continued use of the ACT Composite score as a valid indicator of high school achievement and college readiness. At the same time, ACT expects small changes in summary statistics for the Composite score, which will be discussed below.

More information about the design process for enhancing the ACT and research conducted on the test can be found in the following ACT publications:

- [Design Framework for the ACT Enhancements](#)
- [Initial Evidence Supporting Interpretations of Scores from the Enhanced ACT Test](#)
- [The Enhanced ACT Linking Study Report](#)
- [Interpreting Scores on the Enhanced ACT: Guidance for K-12 and Higher Education Institutions](#)

Anticipated Impacts for Students and Users of ACT Scores

State contract-tested students will continue to receive section scores, a Composite score, and the combined STEM (Science, Math) and ELA (English, Reading, Writing) scores when they take all of the associated sections through their school-day test administration. Beginning in spring 2026, state contract-tested students will receive the new Composite score (EMR), whereas all previous cohorts of state contract-tested students will have received the former Composite score with science (EMRS). **Based on our initial research findings, scores from the enhanced ACT support the same uses as before: informing college admissions decisions, awarding college scholarships, placing students into programs and courses, identifying students in need of academic support, and measuring academic achievement at the school and district level for accountability systems.**

It is important for stakeholders to be aware that the ACT Composite scores that will be reported in 2026 are calculated differently from the Composite scores in previous years. Small, expected differences are likely to occur at both individual student and aggregate levels as a result of the new Composite score calculation.

Student-Level Impacts

- If a student took the legacy version of the ACT test, their reported Composite score from that event includes science, whereas their new ACT Composite score does not. The legacy version of the ACT was last administered on a national testing date in July 2025, and it was last administered in school-day testing during the 2024-2025 school year.
- For individual students, the new Composite score (EMR) may be higher or lower than it would have been under the previous calculation (EMRS). The difference between the two scores is mostly a function of a student's performance on the science test relative to the other test sections, but some students could see a difference between the scores due to a difference in the rounding logic between the two Composite score calculations.
- Most students' new Composite score (EMR) will fall within ± 1 point of their legacy Composite score (EMRS), a range consistent with the test's standard error of measurement. ACT projects that over 90% of ACT-tested students will receive a Composite score from the enhanced ACT that is within one point of the Composite score they would have received with the old calculation — in other words, within the standard error of measurement for the ACT Composite score.

Aggregate-Level Impacts

- Any change in aggregate statistics (e.g., mean) for the Composite score between 2025 and 2026 will be comprised of two factors: 1) potential differences due to the change in the calculation of the Composite score, and 2) potential differences due to the academic achievement of the current and prior cohorts.
- The new Composite score (EMR) and the legacy Composite score (EMRS) will have similar, but not identical, distributions and summary statistics. These are the result of differences in the calculations and the relative score distribution of each of the section scores. ACT's research related to this point is given in full detail in the publication [Initial Evidence Supporting Interpretations of Scores from the Enhanced ACT Test](#).

It is important that small decreases in scores not be misinterpreted, on their own, as evidence of lower performance. They may reflect the new Composite score calculation, not changes in student learning.

Guidance for Using the Enhanced ACT Composite Score

ACT recommends that state education agencies and partner institutions continue to use the ACT Composite score for admissions, scholarships, accountability, and reporting as they have historically. ACT's research shows that the new Composite score (EMR) can be used in place of the old Composite calculation (EMRS), but there are small, expected changes to average scores. Administrators should review scores to inform the communication of test results for 2026 and determine if additional context is necessary to support a specific use.

ACT recommends the following steps to support accurate interpretation of 2026 testing results:

- 1. Look at section scores first.** When comparing previous year results to 2026, start with English, math, and reading scores. If those scores are steady, but the Composite score drops, the new calculation of the Composite score likely explains the drop, not lower student achievement.
- 2. States, districts, and schools should plan to see a difference in average Composite scores, compared to previous testing cycles, that is driven by the change in calculation.** Districts and schools that have higher science scores relative to the other ACT sections will tend to have larger declines in the Composite.
- 3. Before results for 2026 are available, districts and schools can review the 2025 results and recalculate the average Composite score to understand the difference for their school population between the two methods of calculating Composites.** Districts and schools can calculate the new Composite score (EMR) for each student tested in 2025 by averaging their English, Reading, and Mathematics scores and then rounding that average score to the nearest score point. Districts and schools can then calculate the average Composite score for the group. They then can compare the two average Composite scores to see what would have happened last year if the Composite score had been calculated using the new method.
- 4. Additionally, when the 2026 data are finalized, districts and schools can calculate the Composite score using the legacy method (EMRS) by including the science score.** Districts and schools can calculate the legacy Composite score (EMRS) for each student tested in 2026 who completed the science section by averaging their English, Reading, Mathematics, and Science scores and rounding that average score to the nearest score point. Districts and schools can then calculate the average Composite score for the group and compare the average EMRS Composite scores between 2025 and 2026 to see how much the new calculation impacted 2026 results. Comparisons such as this can help explain year-to-year differences in reported Composite scores to stakeholders such as school boards and parents.