Minn. ACT scores dip to lowest in a decade

*Only 28% in 2022 met proficiency benchmarks.*

By EDER CAMPUZANO eder.campuzano@startribune.com | October 14, 2022

The average ACT score for 2022 Minnesota high school graduates dropped to its lowest point in at least a decade as thousands more students took the test than the year before, when numbers were depressed by the pandemic, according to national and statewide statistics released this week.

Nationally, students registered the lowest ACT scores in 30 years, shining further light on the extent to which pandemic disruptions affected academic achievement.

While nearly one-third of Minnesota graduates in 2021 met ACT proficiency benchmarks in English, math, reading and science, only 28% did in 2022. Still, that was better than the national average, where about 22% of students met all four subject benchmarks.

Though Minnesota students who received diplomas in 2022 scored higher in every subject than pupils in states with similar participation rates, the results also indicate that on average they were ill prepared for entry-level college courses in math, science and subjects that require an intense amount of reading such as history, psychology and sociology.

Minnesota Education Commissioner Heather Mueller, who was not available for an interview, said in a statement that the class of 2022 "has been incredibly resilient, experiencing the pandemic during critical school years, and we are pleased Minnesota students continue to score higher than the national average in all ACT categories."

Janet Godwin, CEO of ACT Inc., struck a more dire tone in a statement, calling the five-year decline in national scores "a worrying trend."

"The magnitude of the declines this year is particularly alarming, as we see rapidly growing numbers of seniors leaving high school without meeting the college readiness benchmark in any of the subjects we measure," she said.

G odwin went on to say the declines "are not simply a byproduct of the pandemic.

They are further evidence of longtime systemic failures that were exacerbated by the pandemic."

The average composite score for Minnesota's class of 2022 was 21 out of a possible 36, while the national average was 19.8. Minnesota graduates haven't met the ACT's math or reading benchmarks since 2015. The class of 2013 was the last to meet the college-level science threshold.

The average math score for the Minnesota class of 2022 was 20.7, and the average reading score was 21.7. Scores of 22 indicate a student is on track to handle college-level courses in those subjects.

The average science score was 21.4, below the score of 23 that ACT Inc. says is the baseline to succeed in a college biology class.

Pandemic disruptions defined the class of 2022's sophomore and junior years, which stalled some students' academic gains and social development.

Exam participation also cratered as the U.S. Department of Education waived standardized testing requirements.

About 69% of Minnesota high schoolers who graduated in 2022 took the ACT, compared with 60% the previous year. The state had steadily registered participation rates around 90% in the years leading up to the pandemic.

Three other states — Missouri, Kansas and Arizona — registered similar test participation rates of between 64% and 73%. ACT Inc., the nonprofit that creates and administers the test, says states with similar participation rates make for the best scoring comparisons.

Fourteen states, including neighboring Wisconsin, registered test participation rates of more than 90% this year.

Nationally, participation sits at 36% and has declined steadily for years as many colleges and universities have dropped entrance exams as a requirement for admission.

The University of Minnesota's Twin Cities campus hasn't required applicants to take entrance exams since 2020, and several private schools in the state have also dropped the requirement.

Godwin said schools should seek to do more than return to the pre-pandemic status quo, arguing that it would amount to a disservice to students and educators alike.

"These systemic failures require sustained collective action and support for the academic recovery of high school students as an urgent national priority and imperative," she said.

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