

ASSESSMENT BRIEF

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ACT Results for the Graduating Class of 2017

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ABSTRACT

This brief summarizes results from the ACT college readiness assessment for graduating seniors in the Virginia Beach City Public Schools (VBCPS) class of 2017. The brief includes comparisons of ACT data at the school, division, state, and national levels. A total of 872 students in the VBCPS class of 2017 took the ACT during high school. These students achieved average scores on all four ACT subject tests that were the highest ever attained for a VBCPS senior class. The average ACT composite score of 23.0 for Virginia Beach surpassed the average ACT composite score of 2017 graduates across the nation by two points. The VBCPS composite score was seven-tenths of a point below the average composite score of ACT test takers who graduated in 2017 from public schools in the Commonwealth of Virginia. There were also increases in the percentage of VBCPS students who scored at or above the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks in English and reading. The benchmarks indicate the likelihood of a student being successful in corresponding college coursework. At least half of the Virginia Beach test takers met the ACT benchmark in mathematics, reading, and science, while 79 percent met the benchmark for English.

KEY TOPICS:

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BACKGROUND

During the 1950s and 60s, American colleges and universities experienced an unprecedented increase in enrollment. At the time, Everett F. Lindquist, an education professor at the University of Iowa, was developing the ACT. In 1959, the first ACT assessment was administered by American College Testing Program.¹ The ACT played second fiddle to the older Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) for over five decades, but in 2012 the ACT overtook the SAT as the most popular college entrance exam in the world.²

The ACT—its acronym is the official name—comprises four multiple-choice tests (i.e., English, mathematics, reading, and science) “designed to measure skills that are most important for success in postsecondary education and that are acquired in secondary education.”³ An optional writing test is also available for all test takers.

This brief includes the results of seniors in the class of 2017 who took the ACT at least one time during their sophomore, junior, or senior year and reported their intent to graduate in 2017. The data were derived mainly from school, district, state, and national reports provided by ACT, Inc.

ACT PARTICIPATION

Every year from 1998 through 2016, there was a steady increase in the number of Virginia Beach City Public Schools graduates (VBCPS) who took the ACT. This multiyear trend ended with the most recent graduating class, as about 19 percent fewer 2017 graduates than 2016 graduates took the ACT. The decreases in the number of ACT examinees were not as large for the state (-1.3%) and nation (-2.9%). Almost 18 percent of the VBCPS graduating class of 2017 took the ACT, compared with about 22 percent of the VBCPS class of 2016. Table 1 on the following page shows the total number of ACT test takers in the class of 2017 at the division, state, and national levels.

¹D. Fletcher, “Brief History: Standardized Testing,” *Time Magazine* (11 December 2009), <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1947019,00.html>, accessed on September 13, 2017.

²C. J. Adams, “In Race for Test-Takers, ACT Outscores SAT—for Now,” *Education Week* (24 May 2017), <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2017/05/24/in-race-for-test-takers-act-outscores-sat-for.html>, accessed on September 13, 2017.

³ACT, Inc., About the ACT Test, <http://www.act.org/content/act/en/products-and-services/the-act-educator/the-act-test.html>, accessed on September 13, 2017.

It is not entirely clear why VBCPS saw a considerable drop in ACT participation; however, the decline may be partially related to recent changes in the ACT’s competition, the SAT. When the College Board mimicked a few of the features of the ACT in the new SAT—which replaced the old SAT in early 2016—some experts indicated the move was to regain market share from the ACT.⁴ Under “Why ACT test takers should register for the SAT” on its website, the College Board lists reasons such as “43% more time per question on the SAT than on the ACT.”⁵ In addition, the College Board promoted “the notion that the SAT is an easier test” in a press release.⁶ The press release was titled, “One Year Since First Administration in March 2016, Students Say the New SAT Makes It Easier to Show Their Best Work.”⁷ The number of VBCPS graduates who opted to take the SAT instead of the ACT because they perceived the former to be easier than the latter cannot be determined, but the possibility exists that this perception may have influenced some students’ decisions.

Table 1
Number and Percent of Graduates Who Took the ACT – Five-Year Trends

Graduation Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
VBCPS	847	906	1,011	1,073	872
Percent of VBCPS Graduates	17.5%	18.6%	20.7%	22.1%	17.7%
Virginia	22,165	22,977	25,038	25,866	25,518
Nation	1,799,243	1,845,787	1,924,436	2,090,342	2,030,038

Sources: ACT Profile Report - District, Graduating Class 2017 and VBCPS Report of Combined Term Graduates for each school year.

ACT SUBJECT AND COMPOSITE SCORES

Each student receives a score on a scale of 1 to 36 for each of the ACT subject tests. The composite score is the average of the subject test scores. Table 2 includes the average ACT scores for the last five high school graduating classes for the division, the state, and the nation. The average scores for public school ACT test takers in Virginia are shown in parentheses in the table.

The average scores on all four ACT subject tests increased from the previous year for the division and for all ACT test takers in the Commonwealth of Virginia and the nation. All of the average ACT scores for Virginia Beach seniors in the class of 2017 were the highest on record for any VBCPS graduating class. This resulted in the first-ever ACT average composite score that reached 23 for the division. While Virginia Beach’s average ACT scores exceeded the nation’s average scores by a range of 1.8 to 2.3 points, the gap between the division’s average scores and the average scores of public school ACT examinees across the state ranged from 0.5 to 0.7 of a point.

Table 2
Average ACT Scores – Five-Year Trends

Graduation Year	English			Mathematics			Reading			Science			Composite		
	VBCPS	VA	Nation												
2013	21.4	22.3 (22.0)	20.2	22.0	22.5 (22.4)	20.9	22.1	23.1 (22.9)	21.1	21.6	22.2 (22.1)	20.7	21.9	22.6 (22.4)	20.9
2014	21.1	22.4 (22.0)	20.3	21.9	22.7 (22.5)	20.9	22.4	23.4 (23.1)	21.3	21.7	22.4 (22.3)	20.8	21.9	22.8 (22.6)	21.0
2015	21.7	22.8 (22.5)	20.4	22.0	22.8 (22.7)	20.8	22.5	23.6 (23.4)	21.4	22.2	22.8 (22.7)	20.9	22.2	23.1 (23.0)	21.0
2016	22.2	22.9 (22.5)	20.1	22.3	22.9 (22.7)	20.6	23.5	24.0 (23.8)	21.3	22.6	23.1 (23.0)	20.8	22.8	23.3 (23.1)	20.8
2017	22.6	23.5 (23.3)	20.3	22.5	23.3 (23.2)	20.7	23.7	24.6 (24.4)	21.4	22.9	23.5 (23.4)	21.0	23.0	23.8 (23.7)	21.0

Note: Virginia and national scores are for public, private, and homeschooled students, except the scores for Virginia public school students shown in parentheses.
Sources: ACT Profile Report - District, Graduating Class 2017 (Tables 1.2 and 1.3) and Virginia Department of Education, VDOE News, September 7, 2017.

⁴L. O'Shaughnessy, “College Board Reveals SAT Changes: What to Expect,” CBSNews.com, (16 April 2014), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/college-board-reveals-sat-changes-what-to-expect>, accessed on September 18, 2017.

⁵College Board, Why ACT Test Takers Should Register for the SAT, <https://cb.collegeboard.org/sat/advantage>, accessed on September 18, 2017.

⁶M. Findlay, “New SAT Easier than ACT?,” Applerrouth (11 April 2017), <https://www.applerrouth.com/blog/2017/04/11/new-sat-easier-than-act>, accessed on September 18, 2017.

⁷College Board, One Year Since First Administration in March 2016, Students Say the New SAT Makes It Easier to Show Their Best Work, <https://www.collegeboard.org/releases/2017/new-sat-easier-to-show-best-work>, accessed on September 18, 2017.

ACT SCORES BY RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUP

Table 3 provides a five-year comparison of the average ACT composite scores for the largest racial/ethnic groups in Virginia Beach along with the average composite scores for the same groups of test takers at the state and national levels. The data show that for every major racial/ethnic group, the VBCPS average ACT composite scores were higher than the national average ACT composite scores and lower than the state average composite scores. The average composite scores increased from the previous year for three groups of VBCPS students—Black/African American, White, and Two or more races—as well as for the 28 VBCPS students who did not provide their race/ethnicity. This small, self-selected group’s average composite score surpassed the state.

Table 3
Average ACT Composite Scores by Race/Ethnicity – Five-Year Trends

Group	2013		2014		2015		2016		2017		2017 Virginia Public	2017 Virginia All	2017 Nation All
	n	Score	n	Score	n	Score	n	Score	n	Score			
Black/African American	170	17.8	209	18.2	184	17.8	202	18.2	160	18.5	18.9	19.0	17.1
White	448	23.5	451	23.8	532	23.4	551	24.2	463	24.6	24.8	24.9	22.4
Hispanic/Latino	89	21.0	84	20.2	94	21.3	95	22.8	89	22.0	22.1	22.4	18.9
Asian	43	23.4	43	24.2	59	24.5	66	24.9	56	24.8	26.9	26.7	24.3
Two or more races	58	21.7	82	21.2	87	22.8	94	22.1	70	22.9	23.7	23.7	21.2
Prefer not to respond/No response	35	23.2	34	22.9	48	23.6	55	23.5	28	24.1	23.3	23.7	20.3
All Students	847	21.9	906	21.9	1,011	22.2	1,073	22.8	872	23.0	23.7	23.8	21.0

Notes: n = number tested. Only racial/ethnic groups with 10 or more VBCPS test takers for each year are included in the table. The numbers in the n columns do not add up to the totals in the “All Students” row due to the omission of the racial/ethnic groups with fewer than 10 test takers.
Sources: ACT Profile Reports – District, State, and National, Graduating Class 2017 (Table 1.5).

ACT COLLEGE READINESS BENCHMARKS

The ACT College Readiness Benchmarks are “scores on the ACT subject tests that represent the level of achievement required for students to have a 50% chance of obtaining a B or higher or about a 75% chance of obtaining a C or higher in corresponding credit-bearing first-year college courses.”⁸

Table 4
Percent of Virginia Beach Students Meeting ACT College Readiness Benchmark Scores – Five-Year Trends

Graduation Year	Number Tested	English (18)	Math (22)	Reading (22)	Science (23)	Met Each Benchmark
2013	847	73%	54%	51%	42%	34%
2014	906	70%	52%	51%	42%	33%
2015	1,011	72%	55%	55%	48%	36%
2016	1,073	74%	57%	60%	50%	40%
2017	872	79%	55%	64%	50%	40%
2017 VA Public	21,299	79%	60%	66%	55%	45%
2017 Virginia All	25,518	80%	60%	67%	56%	45%
2017 Nation All	2,030,038	61%	41%	47%	37%	27%

Sources: ACT Profile Reports - District and State, Graduating Class 2017 (Table 1.1) and VDOE News, September 7, 2017.

VBCPS graduates scored at or above the benchmark in English, which was an increase of five percent from last year’s graduating class, and the same percentage as public school ACT examinees across the state. Forty percent of the 2017 graduates in Virginia Beach met all four of the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks.

The subject tests and corresponding college courses are as follows:

- ACT English test – English Composition
- ACT mathematics test – Algebra
- ACT reading test – Social Sciences
- ACT science test – Biology

Table 4 shows the percentage of test takers who scored at or above the ACT benchmarks. Percentages are listed for 2017 graduates at the division, state, and national levels, and for VBCPS seniors in the classes of 2013 through 2016. At least 50 percent or more of the 2017 VBCPS graduates who took the ACT met or exceeded at least one of the College Readiness Benchmarks. Seventy-nine percent of the

⁸ACT, Inc., *Why Scores on the ACT® Test Are Scores You Can Trust*, <http://www.act.org/content/act/en/research/scores-you-can-trust.html>, accessed on September 19, 2017.

The number and percent of VBCPS 2017 graduates in the four major racial/ethnic groups whose ACT performance met or surpassed three or more ACT College Readiness Benchmarks is shown in Table 5. For comparison purposes, the percentages for these groups at the state and national levels are also shown. The percentages for each group of VBCPS ACT test takers were higher than the national percentages but lower than the percentages at the state level; this follows the same trend as other ACT results for 2017 graduates. Because ACT benchmarks are absolute cutoff scores (i.e., 18 for English, 22 for math, 22 for reading, and 23 for science), the percentage of students meeting at least three of the benchmark scores tends to vary each year for groups that are relatively small (e.g., VBCPS Black/African American, VBCPS Hispanic/Latino, and VBCPS Asian), compared with larger groups at the state and national levels.

Table 5
Percent of 2017 Graduates Meeting Three or More
ACT College Readiness Benchmark Scores by Race/Ethnicity

Group	n VBCPS	% VBCPS	Virginia All	Nation All
Black/African American	32/160	20%	24%	12%
White	306/463	66%	68%	50%
Hispanic/Latino	39/89	44%	49%	23%
Asian	37/56	66%	77%	62%

Sources: C.K. Phillips (personal communication, 26 September 2017), *The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2017 – Virginia* (p. 4) *The Condition of College & Career Readiness 2017 – National* (p. 6).

ACT RESULTS BY HIGH SCHOOL

Table 6 shows the average scores and number of ACT test takers by high school for VBCPS seniors in the classes of 2016 and 2017. The table also includes ACT average scores and number of examinees for the division, the state, and the nation. When these data are used to make comparisons or draw conclusions, it is important to note that (1) the sample sizes for most of the schools are somewhat small and may fluctuate from year to year, and (2) high schools with advanced academic programs generally have higher ACT scores due partly to the rigorous admission standards for students accepted to the programs.

The number of 2017 graduates who took the ACT in Virginia Beach ranged from 12 students at Green Run Collegiate (GRC) to 132 students at Princess Anne High School. First Colonial, Ocean Lakes, and Princess Anne were the only high schools with increased ACT enrollment from the class of 2016 to the class of 2017. (The first senior class at GRC was during the 2016-2017 school year.) While all but two VBCPS high schools saw an increase in at least one subject test average score, only Kellam and Landstown high schools had increases in every ACT average score including the average composite score.

Table 6
Virginia Beach ACT Results by High School – 2016 and 2017

School	Number Tested		English		Mathematics		Reading		Science		Composite	
	2016	2017	2016	2017	2016	2017	2016	2017	2016	2017	2016	2017
Bayside HS	110	83	21.0	19.7	20.7	20.5	22.2	21.1	21.4	21.0	21.5	20.7
Cox HS	136	77	23.1	23.6	23.5	22.5	24.4	24.3	23.2	23.3	23.7	23.5
First Colonial HS	105	116	22.4	22.4	22.5	22.1	24.0	23.9	22.6	22.9	23.0	23.0
Green Run Collegiate	0	12	—	18.6	—	21.2	—	21.4	—	20.8	—	20.7
Green Run HS	58	28	17.3	17.5	19.3	18.7	18.6	18.6	19.3	19.3	18.8	18.6
Kellam HS	132	95	21.7	23.6	21.4	22.4	22.9	24.5	22.0	23.1	22.1	23.5
Kempsville HS	42	30	21.1	21.2	22.3	21.3	22.9	21.8	23.2	21.3	22.6	21.4
Landstown HS	81	71	20.4	21.3	21.0	21.3	21.4	22.3	21.0	21.5	21.0	21.7
Ocean Lakes HS	108	120	24.8	24.3	25.2	24.8	26.4	25.5	25.7	25.2	25.6	25.1
Princess Anne HS	130	132	25.9	26.3	25.0	25.3	27.2	26.6	25.2	25.2	26.0	25.9
Salem HS	84	51	21.3	20.3	21.2	21.2	22.7	21.9	21.6	21.7	21.8	21.4
Tallwood HS	86	56	20.0	20.5	20.3	20.1	21.6	22.4	20.9	20.7	20.8	21.1
VBCPS	1,073	872	22.2	22.6	22.3	22.5	23.5	23.7	22.6	22.9	22.8	23.0
Virginia Public	21,824	21,299	22.5	23.3	22.7	23.2	23.8	24.4	23.0	23.4	23.1	23.7
Virginia All	25,866	25,518	22.9	23.5	22.9	23.3	24.0	24.6	23.1	23.5	23.3	23.8
Nation All	2,090,342	2,030,03	20.1	20.3	20.6	20.7	21.3	21.4	20.8	21.0	20.8	21.0

Note: The number tested columns do not add up to the VBCPS total due to the omission of one Renaissance Academy student in each column.
 Sources: ACT Profile Reports - District and High School, Graduating Class 2017 (Table 1.2) and VDOE News, September 7, 2017.

ACT WRITING TEST SCORES

The ACT Writing Test is optional for all students who register for the ACT. In September 2015, students began taking a writing test that included several modifications from the previous version. The design modifications included the following:

Table 7

2017 Average ACT Writing Test Scores by Race/Ethnicity

Group	n VBCPS	VBCPS Score	Virginia All	Nation All
Black/African American	62	6.5	6.4	5.6
White	246	7.6	7.4	6.8
Hispanic/Latino	49	7.0	7.0	6.3
Asian	34	7.9	7.9	7.4
Two or more races	39	7.3	7.3	6.7
Prefer not to respond/No response	19	7.5	7.2	6.4
All Students	452	7.4	7.3	6.5

Sources: ACT Profile Reports - District and State, Graduating Classes 2017 (Table 5.1).

- A broader range of engaging subject matter
- Prompt offers different points of access to the issue
- Writing task more clearly resembles real-world argumentation
- More structure for planning and more time for composing⁹

Approximately 52 percent of the ACT test takers in the VBCPS class of 2017 opted to take the ACT Writing Test. The score scale of the test is from 2 to 12. Table 7 shows that every racial/ethnic group in Virginia Beach attained much higher average writing scores than their counterparts at the national level. Unlike other ACT results for 2017 graduates, the Virginia Beach average ACT writing scores of each group were the same or higher than the average writing scores for the state. Due to the comparatively small number of ACT Writing Test examinees in each group, except for the White student group, the VBCPS average scores for these groups could be considerably different next year.

SUMMARY

While the average ACT scores for VBCPS students in the graduating class of 2017 increased from their predecessors' scores on all four subject tests by a range of 0.2 to 0.4 points, the number of graduates who took the ACT decreased by about 19 percent from one year to the next. The average subject scores and composite score were the highest ever achieved for Virginia Beach, but the 872 ACT test takers were the fewest since the VBCPS class of 2013's total of 847 ACT test takers. The VBCPS average ACT scores, as well as the average ACT scores for every major racial/ethnic group (i.e., Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, White, and two or more races), exceeded the national averages for each corresponding group. As in past years, the VBCPS scores were all lower than the state's average ACT scores, with one notable exception. The average scores of 2017 Virginia Beach graduates who chose to take the optional ACT Writing Test were equal or higher than the average writing scores of ACT test takers who graduated in 2017 from public and private schools in Virginia.

⁹ACT, Inc., *Writing Test Scores*, <http://www.act.org/content/act/en/products-and-services/the-act/scores/writing-test-scores.html>, accessed on September 25, 2017.