STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE, SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE,
HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON SCHOOL AID, AND
SENATE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON K–12, SCHOOL AID, EDUCATION

MICHIGAN LEGISLATURE

ON

THE ACT ASPIRE ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

FEBRUARY 5, 2014

Introduction

Good afternoon, Representative Lyons, Senator Pavlov, Representative Rogers, Senator Walker, and members of the committees and subcommittees. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about the ACT Aspire Assessment System.

ACT is an independent, not-for-profit organization that provides assessment, research, information, and program management services in education and workforce development. We are perhaps best known for the ACT test, the widely used college admission examination, but our scope and range go far beyond that one exam. Each year, we serve millions of individuals in middle schools, high schools, colleges, professional associations, businesses, and government agencies both nationally and internationally. Although designed to meet a wide array of needs, all ACT programs and services have one guiding purpose: helping people achieve education and workplace success.

For the more than 50 years of its existence, ACT has collected and reported data on students' academic readiness for college. And while the attention paid to assessing mastery of common academic standards tied to college and career readiness is relatively recent, ACT has been implementing such standards in its assessments for decades. We have developed empirically based standards that are linked to actual student success at the postsecondary level. ACT is the only organization with decades of data showing exactly what happens to high school graduates once they get to college or workforce training, based on how well they were prepared in middle school and high school. In this regard, our philosophy and approach are unique, in that our assessments are grounded in research that tells us what knowledge and skills are *essential* in order for students to be ready for college and career. No other organization can make that claim.

ACT has assisted the State of Michigan in measuring the college and career readiness of all public high school students since 2007, when two of ACT's programs, the ACT college readiness assessment (commonly known as "the ACT") and ACT WorkKeys, were incorporated into the

Michigan Merit Examination. During that time, there has been a 30 percent increase in the number of Michigan students demonstrating readiness for college and career. The Department and educators in the state should be commended for this improvement. Under a pilot project, Michigan also administers ACT Explore to all eighth-grade students in the state and ACT Plan to all tenth-grade students. These programs enable educators to monitor these students' progress toward college and career readiness, enabling them to make academic interventions when necessary to keep their students on target. This statewide initiative provides *all* students—including those who have never considered college as an option—with the opportunity to identify academic strengths and weaknesses, explore educational and career interests, set high standards for academic achievement, and prepare to meet their educational and career goals.

Recently, ACT has developed the ACT Aspire system for students in grades 3 through 10 in an effort to extend the ability of ACT's programs to monitor student progress at earlier stages in their educations, as well as to respond to the new challenges offered by the Common Core State Standards,. Given that ACT research shows that academic achievement by the eighth grade is the best predictor of college and career readiness at the end of high school, ACT Aspire would enable Michigan to monitor and intervene with at-risk students even earlier than had previously been possible with ACT Explore and ACT Plan alone.

In my testimony today, I will describe the background to ACT's development of a next-generation assessment system linked to the Common Core State Standards; present an overview of the ACT Aspire system; outline the value of the system to users, including reporting; and briefly discuss ACT's policies regarding the security, confidentiality, and ownership of student data. It is ACT's conviction that ACT Aspire can help Michigan to extend and build upon the work it has done on college and career readiness, and to make continued good use of the extensive college and career readiness data it has amassed to date.

ACT's research into, and development of, a next-generation assessment system tied to the Common Core State Standards

ACT's long history of college and career readiness research and assessment was relied upon extensively in the Common Core State Standards Initiative, which began in 2009. ACT staff served in multiple capacities, including writing and reviewing standards, and ACT's research and data on college and career readiness established both the general priorities and specific expectations of the Common Core State Standards. In particular, ACT's College Readiness Standards—which underpin the ACT college readiness assessment as well as ACT Explore and ACT Plan—served as one of the foundations upon which the Common Core State Standards were based.

In addition, ACT's empirical definition of college and career readiness—the acquisition of the knowledge and skills a student needs to succeed in credit-bearing, first-year courses at a two- or four-year college, trade or technical school without the need for remediation—was adopted by the initiative and continues to be cited routinely in discussions related to the Common Core State Standards.

For the past several years, prior to and during the period of Common Core adoption, ACT has engaged in discussions with states to determine their future needs for new, improved, and innovative assessment systems that measure college and career readiness both within and beyond the context of the Common Core State Standards.

At the same time, every three to five years, ACT has continued to survey thousands of elementary, middle school, high school, and college educators to pinpoint the knowledge and skills needed for first-year college coursework and to ensure that what ACT's assessments measure continues its empirical linkages with classroom and postsecondary success.

Using this knowledge, ACT has leveraged the organization's extensive research and expertise to build ACT Aspire to assist states' efforts to monitor and improve student progress toward college and career readiness beginning in grade 3. ACT Aspire is based on an articulated and sequential progression of knowledge and skills which ultimately connect to college and career readiness and success.

In 2012 and 2013, ACT conducted field-test, equating, mode-comparability, and scaling studies of ACT Aspire items in both paper-and-pencil and computer-based formats. In all, more than 241,000 students across 31 states and the District of Columbia participated in these studies, including almost 45,500 students at 153 Michigan schools.

Overview of ACT Aspire

ACT Aspire is a longitudinal assessment system in English, math, reading, science and writing that connects student growth and progress from elementary grades through high school in the context of college and career readiness. ACT Aspire was built with a deep understanding of how students develop and demonstrate achievement and how they progress academically during their school years. ACT Aspire includes a vertically scaled battery of achievement tests capable of measuring growth in a consistent and comparable fashion. In order to achieve this coherent, longitudinal system of measurement and provide actionable information for all students, the ACT Aspire design includes items with a range of difficulties, requiring a range of knowledge depths, and covering a progression of learning from foundational concepts to sophisticated applications.

ACT Aspire scores will be linked to ACT's College Readiness Standards and results provided in reporting categories that are aligned to the Common Core State Standards, allowing states to monitor student progress towards meeting both sets of standards. Because ACT's college readiness standards and benchmarks informed the development of the Common Core State Standards, and because many of the same ACT content experts who helped develop the Common Core State Standards also serve on the ACT Aspire design and development teams, ACT was able to build ACT Aspire expressly to measure college and career readiness as well as to align and report to the Common Core. Test items for ACT Aspire are entirely new and coded to specific Common Core standards. But the ACT Aspire system will also go beyond the Common Core State Standards–tested subjects of English Language Arts and mathematics to measure performance in science and writing.

As is the case with the aforementioned programs already in use in Michigan, ACT Aspire is linked to ACT's empirically validated College Readiness Standards, and has readiness benchmarks at each grade level that are empirically linked to the College Readiness Benchmark scores previously established for the ACT. Used in combination with the ACT, ACT Aspire completes a uniform and aligned assessment system, from grade 3 through high school, that is not currently possible with any other set of assessments.

ACT Aspire will be delivered online (with a pencil-and-paper option available). The system includes a mix of question types: constructed response, selected response, and technology enhanced. It is also modular, so that states and districts can focus their efforts on specific subjects and/or grade levels if they choose.

ACT Aspire is available in Spanish for grades 3–6, and translated support materials for grades 3–10 will be available at launch. Additional languages continue to be evaluated for inclusion in future versions of the ACT Aspire system.

The summative component of ACT Aspire will be available beginning in spring 2014, while interim and formative components will launch in fall 2014. In May, just a few months from now, the State of Alabama will administer ACT Aspire as its statewide summative assessment for grades 3 through 8. Like Michigan, Alabama will administer the ACT to all 11th-grade public school students this spring. Alabama currently administers ACT Plan to all 10th graders, ACT Explore to all 8th graders, and ACT QualityCore assessments in mathematics and English.

Value to users

ACT Aspire is an interactive system that provides deeper and richer insights into student performance, as well as access to additional resources and tools that are not possible with traditional reporting methods. The reports reflect the needs of educators, students, and parents as identified during the development process, and facilitate effective, early academic interventions with off-target students. To that end, users will be able to access results when it is convenient for them, and decide the level of detail they want in reviewing and analyzing their text, and are targeted to the user.

Reports display information in a clean, direct manner, with both numerical and graphical representations supported by descriptive text. Thus, the full range of faculty, from novice through expert, can immediately gain actionable insights.

For example, student reports—available to students and parents for downloading or printing—include the student's performance on each subject (English, mathematics, reading, science, and writing) and indicate level of college or career readiness in each subject. The report also breaks down a student's performance by subject skill (e.g., for science, Interpretation of Data; Science Investigation; and Evaluation of Models, Inferences, and Experimental Results). The report also lists improvement ideas for students performing at the lowest skill level—for example, suggesting that the student practice making conclusions or predictions using data from science experiments. Finally, based on current performance, the report provides predicted scores on the ACT by subject area.

Teacher reports are user-friendly and actionable, grouping subject proficiency by student so that teachers can easily identify the range of student performance, from those exceeding benchmarks to those needing additional supports. The teacher report also includes student growth distributions and skill-level performance breakdown.

Data security, confidentiality, and ownership

ACT is uncompromising in its protection of the personally identifiable information (PII) collected in association with its test administrations. This information is used and disclosed in conformity with industry standards, as well as in accordance with ACT confidentiality policies set forth in registration materials and applicable U.S. law. ACT reports PII and scores to parties designated by the test taker to receive such scores and, where applicable, shares those scores with school districts, state departments of education, or other entities that have paid the fee for the test. ACT may also share data with selected scholarship programs and agencies, government agencies having

authority over schools and districts and, more rarely, parties approved by ACT's executive management to engage in research to inform and improve educational practices. Such researchers must meet certain standards and are required to sign confidentiality agreements to safeguard the data they have received. When such instances do occur, data is shared in a secure and confidential manner so that no individual students can be identified directly. Under no circumstances do students give up their rights to privacy.

The security of student PII is important to ACT. We follow generally accepted industry standards to protect the personal information we receive. Sensitive information (e.g., name, address, Social Security number) is encrypted using secure socket layer technology.

Conclusion

ACT has been pleased to assist the State of Michigan in its mission of ensuring and increasing the college and career readiness of all students. ACT has the experience and expertise Michigan can rely upon to help deliver a state assessment program aligned with the Common Core State Standards. With ACT Aspire, Michigan has the potential to embody what ACT has set out to do in its move toward a next-generation assessment system: truly support states in their efforts to monitor students' performance and growth in a focused and systematic way throughout their educational careers, from early to upper grade levels. ACT looks forward to extending its collaboration with the state, and will continue to provide the high-quality assessments, research, and actionable data that Michigan values.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have about my testimony, ACT Aspire, or to clarify any questions around our response to the Michigan Department of Education's assessment survey in December. Thank you.