



Solving the Problem of Low ACT Scores in Oklahoma

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How to cite this paper: Loza Hoyos, O. (2025) Solving the Problem of Low ACT Scores in Oklahoma. *Open Access Library Journal*, 12: e14222. <https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1114222>

Received: September 4, 2025

Accepted: September 21, 2025

Published: September 24, 2025

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Abstract

Oklahoma's average composite ACT score for the Class of 2024 is 17.6, placing the state second-to-last nationally and well below the national average of 19.4 [1]. With the ACT as a statewide accountability measure and a college readiness indicator, this underperformance signals systemic challenges in curriculum alignment, educator capacity, and student support systems. This article employs a narrative synthesis of educational literature grounded in factors like GPA, attendance, literacy, teacher readiness, and equitable access. Drawing from frameworks such as Bruner's Spiral Curriculum [2] and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support [3], it proposes actionable strategies for elevating ACT performance in Oklahoma through coherent curriculum alignment, strengthened teacher development and retention, integrated ACT preparation, and systemic equity supports including MTSS, PBIS, and family engagement. The article concludes with implications for practice and policy that can foster improved cognitive readiness, testing stamina, and equitable outcomes, thereby enhancing postsecondary access for all Oklahoma students.

Subject Areas

Education

Keywords

English Language Learners (ELL), Emergency Certified Teacher, Mobility Rate, Literacy, Socioeconomic Status, Spiral Curriculum Theory

1. Introduction

The American College Testing (ACT) exam has become a critical metric for assessing college and career readiness across U.S. high schools. Beyond serving college-bound students, its consideration in Oklahoma's accountability system and

graduation standards has made it a key indicator of academic effectiveness. Yet, Oklahoma's Class of 2024 posted an average composite score of 17.6, ranking second-to-last nationally, comfortably below the 19.4 U.S. average. Only about 10% of Oklahoma graduates met all four ACT college readiness benchmarks (English, reading, math, science), compared with 20% nationally.

1.1. The ACT as a Statewide Accountability Measure

The ACT remains a central metric of college and career readiness in Oklahoma, where it is embedded into state accountability systems and graduation requirements [4]. For many students, ACT scores influence not only admission to higher education institutions but also scholarship eligibility and access to financial aid. This reliance on the ACT underscores the high stakes associated with performance.

1.2. The National Test-Optional Movement

Nationally, higher education has seen a significant movement toward test-optional admissions policies. More universities now allow students to apply without submitting standardized test scores, reflecting concerns about equity, access, and test bias. However, despite this trend, Oklahoma has maintained its reliance on the ACT, both as a measure of accountability and as a tool for assessing college readiness [5]. This divergence highlights the state's unique educational priorities.

1.3. Oklahoma's Position and Performance Gap

Persistent underperformance on the ACT has far-reaching consequences. The state average of 17.6 for the Class of 2024 trails the national average of 19.4, placing Oklahoma near the bottom among all U.S. states [1]. This performance gap highlights the need for urgent reforms in instructional practices, teacher preparation, and systemic supports (See **Figure 1**).

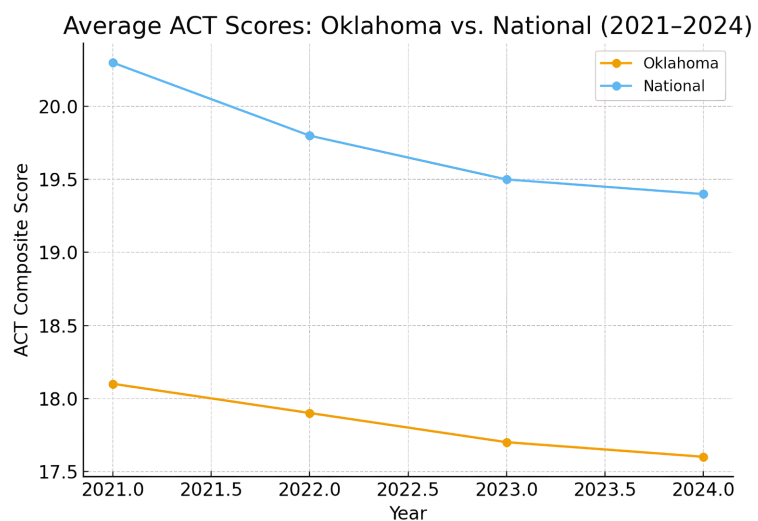


Figure 1. Average ACT scores: Oklahoma vs. National (2021-2024).

1.4. Purpose Statement

This persistent underachievement reflects not isolated gaps but systemic challenges spanning instructional coherence, educator readiness, resource inequity, student preparedness, and access. Such conditions impede equitable postsecondary pathways and reflect broader disparities within Oklahoma's education system.

1.5. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to provide recommendations to solve the problem of low scores on the ACT in Oklahoma High Schools. This applied research study includes both qualitative and quantitative data collection approaches. The study synthesizes research on predictors of ACT outcomes, such as GPA, attendance, teacher quality, literacy instruction, and targeted support systems, offering evidence-based, scalable recommendations for Oklahoma's districts and education agencies.

1.6. Central Research Question

How can the problem of low ACT scores be solved in Oklahoma High Schools?

1.7. Audience and Scope

The target audience includes district leaders, state policymakers, principals, and teacher leaders seeking to drive measurable improvements in student readiness and equity. Recommendations combine strategic curriculum alignment, professional learning enhancements, systemic support interventions, and community engagement to catalyze state-level improvement.

1.8. Definitions

- Emergency certified teacher: An applicant who has not completed the educational requirements to fill vacant teaching positions [6].
- English Language Learners (ELL): Students classified as potentially not being born in the United States, whose native language is not English, and have difficulty speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language [7].
- Literacy: A person who can recognize needed information and identify, evaluate, and effectively use the required information [8].
- Mobility rate: Students who move from one school to another during the school year or have moved from one school to another during their time in high school [9].
- Socioeconomic: A measure of neighborhood income, employment, education levels, crime, health, availability of services, and local environment [10].
- Spiral curriculum theory: Any subject can be taught to any child at any stage of development [11].

1.9. Structure of the Article

Following this introduction, the article presents:

- A Condensed Literature Review, highlighting critical themes from prior research on ACT predictors and systemic frameworks.
- A Methodological Summary, describing the narrative synthesis process and scope of evidence considered.
- Key Findings, organized by actionable domains—curriculum, educator capacity, student supports.
- Targeted Recommendations, translating evidence into implementation pathways for Oklahoma schools and systems.
- Implications for Policy & Practice, including considerations of feasibility and collaboration.
- A Conclusion, underscoring urgency, responsibility, and direction for future inquiry.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Predictors of ACT Performance

A substantial body of research identifies key predictors of ACT success. Among the most consistent indicators are grade point average (GPA), attendance, and literacy levels. Balfanz *et al.* (2007) demonstrated that chronic absenteeism is strongly correlated with reduced academic achievement and lower standardized test scores [12]. Similarly, Graham and Hebert (2010) found that literacy skills, particularly writing to support reading comprehension, significantly influence ACT performance [13].

2.2. Equity Considerations: ELL and Socioeconomic Factors

A high proportion of ELL students presents distinct challenges for ACT readiness, given the test's language-intensive format (7). Effective approaches include culturally responsive teaching, bilingual educator recruitment, and technology-assisted language learning [14] [15]. Socioeconomic disadvantage compounds these barriers through resource limitations, reduced parental involvement, and lower access to enrichment opportunities [16].

Socioeconomic disparities exacerbate these challenges. Darling-Hammond (2010) emphasized that inequities in resources, funding, and access to high-quality teachers disproportionately affect students in low-income and rural communities [17]. Students from these contexts often lack access to ACT preparation resources such as tutoring, practice exams, or test prep courses.

2.3. Frameworks for Intervention: MTSS and PBIS

Several frameworks provide pathways for addressing academic and non-academic barriers. Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) provide a layered model of intervention, ensuring that students receive differentiated instruction and support based on their needs [3]. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) enhance school climate and engagement, reducing barriers to learning [18].

2.4. The Case for Vertically Aligned Literacy Instruction

Bruner's (1960) Spiral Curriculum provides further insight into vertically aligned literacy instruction [2]. Revisiting and reinforcing key skills across grade levels ensures that students retain foundational knowledge. For ACT preparation, this model supports consistent development of reading, writing, and mathematical reasoning skills.

2.5. Literacy and English Language Arts Proficiency

ACT performance, especially in English and reading subtests, is closely tied to literacy development [19] [20]. Schools in low socioeconomic contexts often face compounded literacy challenges, including underprepared teachers and limited access to rich, diverse texts. Research emphasizes that early literacy mastery, supported by formative and summative assessments, enhances later performance on high-stakes tests [21].

2.6. Teacher Quality, Readiness, and Retention

Teacher readiness was categorized as content mastery, pedagogical skill, and classroom management significantly influences student outcomes [22]. Persistent shortages have increased reliance on emergency and alternatively certified teachers, often with negative implications for standardized test performance [23]. High turnover exacerbates instructional inconsistency, especially in low-income schools [24]. Professional development, mentoring, and recruitment strategies are essential to stabilize and strengthen the teaching workforce.

2.7. Curriculum Alignment and Instructional Coherence

Misalignment between curriculum, instruction, and ACT-tested standards undermines student preparation. Research highlights the benefits of vertical alignment that ensures skill progression from elementary through high school and horizontal alignment across grade-level teams [25]. Bruner's Spiral Curriculum Theory supports this approach, advocating for revisiting key concepts at increasing levels of complexity [26].

2.8. Student Support Frameworks: MTSS and PBIS

MTSS provides a structured, data-informed approach for identifying and addressing academic and behavioral needs [27]. When combined with PBIS, these systems foster positive school climates, reduce behavioral disruptions, and increase time on task, all of which correlate with improved academic performance [28].

2.9. Testing Stamina and Preparation Practices

Endurance and familiarity with test structures are critical for ACT success. Jacobson (2019) and Kubiszyn & Borich (2024) find that deliberate practice, including exposure to timed, ACT-like conditions, reduces anxiety and improves stamina [29] [30]. Schools integrating ACT-style assessments into regular instruction see

higher composite scores.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine the factors contributing to low ACT performance among high school students in Oklahoma and to identify targeted recommendations for improvement. A case study approach allowed for an in-depth analysis of local conditions while drawing from statewide and national research to ensure broader applicability.

3.2. Data Sources

Data were drawn from two primary sources: 1) document analysis of ACT performance trends, and 2) interviews with high school teachers across Oklahoma districts.

3.3. Participants

Participants included school administrators, teachers, and instructional support staff directly involved in ACT preparation and student support. Their perspectives were essential for identifying on-the-ground challenges and potential solutions. Stakeholders represented multiple content areas and varying levels of experience, offering a balanced view of instructional and structural issues.

3.4. Data Collection

Data were gathered through three primary sources:

- Document Analysis—Review of ACT score reports, attendance records, and GPA data spanning multiple school years.
- Interviews—Semi-structured interviews with key school staff to capture perceptions of barriers and successful interventions.
- Literature Review—Extensive analysis of peer-reviewed research and policy documents on ACT performance, standardized testing, and educational equity.

3.5. Data Analysis

Thematic coding was used to identify recurring patterns in interview transcripts and document analysis. Themes were aligned with known predictors of ACT success such as GPA, attendance, literacy, teacher quality, and curriculum alignment. The data was cross-referenced with research-based strategies from the literature.

3.6. Coding and Thematic Analysis

Themes were coded around predictors of ACT success, including literacy, curriculum alignment, teacher retention, English Language Learners (ELLs), socioeconomic barriers, and student stamina.

3.7. Validity and Generalizability

By triangulating teacher perspectives with ACT performance data, the findings extend beyond individual schools and highlight trends relevant at the statewide level.

3.8. Ethical Considerations

To protect the confidentiality of participants and the study site, all identifying details were removed or generalized. Findings are presented in a manner that addresses statewide trends without disclosing school-specific performance data. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the study complied with institutional research ethics guidelines.

3.9. Findings

Analysis of data from the case study, combined with an extensive review of national and Oklahoma-specific literature, revealed several interrelated factors influencing ACT performance. These findings point toward a set of strategic recommendations that, if implemented at scale, could improve outcomes for students across the state (See [Figure 2](#) and [Figure 3](#)).

Literacy as a Foundational Challenge

Teachers consistently cited literacy as a weakness that extends across subject areas.

Curriculum Misalignment with ACT Standards

District curricula often lack explicit alignment with ACT standards.

Teacher Turnover and Emergency Certification

High turnover and reliance on emergency certifications disrupt instruction.

Challenges Facing English Language Learners (ELLs)

ELL students face unique barriers without targeted interventions.

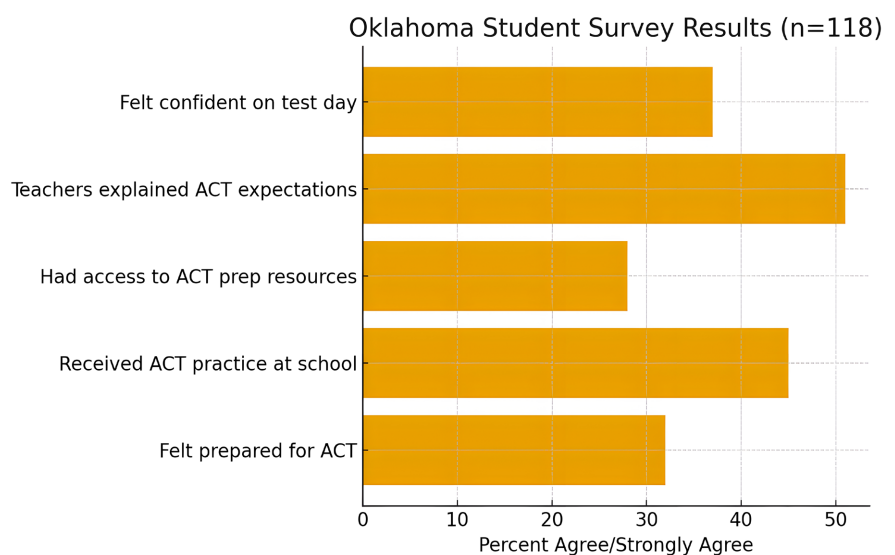


Figure 2. Oklahoma student survey results (n = 118).

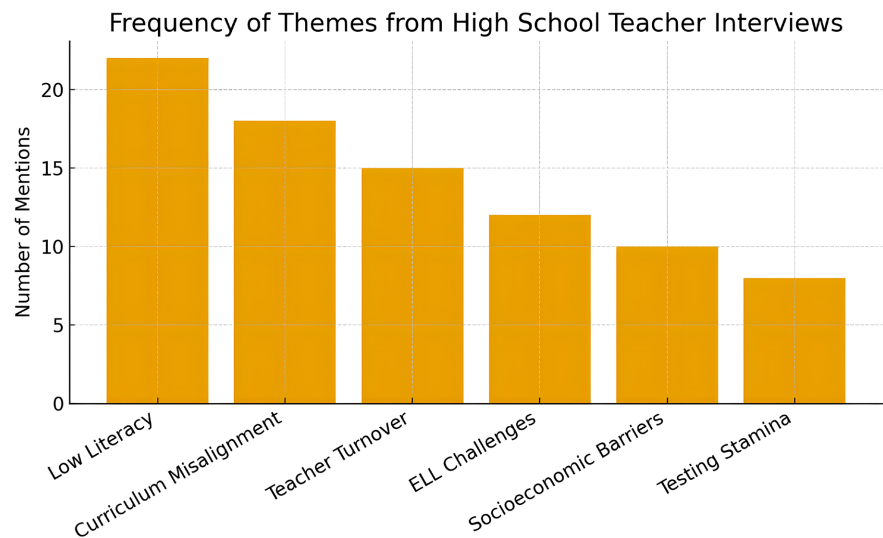


Figure 3. Frequency of themes from high school teacher interviews.

Socioeconomic Barriers and Access to Resources

Low-income students often lack access to test preparation resources.

Student Testing Stamina and Engagement

Teachers reported student fatigue during the exam, which negatively affected scores [31] [32].

4. Recommendations

4.1. Vertically Aligned Literacy Instruction

By 2027, 90% of districts should implement vertically aligned literacy frameworks beginning in the third grade.

4.2. Strengthening Teacher Retention

Oklahoma must reduce reliance on emergency certifications through pay increases and residency programs.

4.3. Curriculum Alignment to ACT Standards

By 2026, district curricula should align to ACT standards with formative assessments embedded.

4.4. ACT Practice and Benchmark Assessments

By 2025, all 11th graders should complete three ACT-style practice assessments annually.

4.5. Addressing Socioeconomic Disparities

Expand free ACT preparation programs to 100% of high-poverty and rural districts (See **Table 1**).

Table 1. SMART recommendations for improving ACT outcomes.

Focus Area	SMART Goal
Literacy Instruction	By 2027, 90% of districts implement vertically aligned literacy frameworks beginning in grade 3, measured by annual benchmarks.
Teacher Retention	Reduce emergency-certified teachers statewide by 20% within 3 years through pay increases & residency programs.
Curriculum Alignment	By 2026, align district curricula to ACT College Readiness Standards with 100% of teachers using formative ACT-style assessments.
ACT Preparation	Provide all 11th graders 3+ ACT-style practice exams annually by 2025, tracked in district dashboards.
Socioeconomic Supports	Expand free ACT prep programs to 100% of high-poverty and/or rural districts by 2026, measured by program participation rates.

4.6. Summary of Impact

Improving ACT performance in Oklahoma requires a multi-layered approach that addresses foundational literacy, teacher quality, curriculum alignment, socio-economic barriers, student engagement, data-driven instruction, and test-taking readiness. Implementing these recommendations would not only raise ACT scores but also prepare students for postsecondary success, strengthen the state's workforce pipeline, and reduce long-standing educational inequities.

4.7. Barriers to Implementation

Funding Limitations

Many districts lack sufficient funding to support large-scale ACT preparation initiatives.

Policy Hurdles

Oklahoma's accountability system limits flexibility for alternative readiness measures [4].

Teacher Turnover and Workforce Stability

Turnover undermines instructional consistency and long-term reforms.

Curriculum Narrowing and Unintended Consequences

An overemphasis on ACT prep risks narrowing the curriculum. Mitigation strategies include embedding ACT skills into authentic, inquiry-based learning.

5. Conclusion

5.1. The Urgency of Reform

Improving ACT performance in Oklahoma requires urgent, systemic reform. The state's average ACT score of 17.6 not only places it well below the national average but also signals deeper issues in instruction, equity, and educational access (1). If left unaddressed, this persistent underperformance will continue to limit opportunities for thousands of students, particularly those from rural and low-income

backgrounds.

5.2. Summary of Key Findings

This study identified six major themes contributing to low ACT outcomes: literacy challenges, misaligned curricula, teacher turnover, the needs of English Language Learners, socioeconomic barriers, and limited testing stamina. Each of these challenges represents both an obstacle and an opportunity. For example, while literacy remains a foundational gap, it also offers the clearest path for intervention, as vertically aligned literacy instruction can be systematically implemented statewide [2].

5.3. Implications for Policy and Practice

Addressing these issues requires intentional strategies. Policymakers must allocate funding to ensure equitable access to preparation resources, professionalize teaching through residency programs and competitive pay, and hold districts accountable for curriculum alignment. At the school and district level, administrators can embed ACT practice into existing coursework, provide sustained professional development for teachers, and use MTSS and PBIS frameworks to support students holistically [3] [18]. These strategies ensure that ACT improvement does not come at the expense of rich, inquiry-based learning but rather integrates test preparation with authentic educational experiences.

The paper also highlighted barriers, including limited funding, policy rigidity, and the risk of curriculum narrowing. While these challenges are substantial, they can be mitigated through targeted state grants, partnerships with higher education institutions, and policies that value both standardized test readiness and broader educational goals.

5.4. Future Directions

Future research should expand this study by incorporating multiple case studies across diverse Oklahoma high schools. Quantitative data, such as longitudinal tracking of ACT performance following specific interventions, would provide stronger evidence of effectiveness and scalability. Engaging student voices directly in future studies could also enrich understanding of motivation, testing stamina, and perceptions of ACT preparation.

6. Final Thoughts

Ultimately, raising ACT scores in Oklahoma is not about teaching to the test, but ensuring that students graduate with the literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills they need for college and career success. The strategies outlined in this article provide a roadmap for statewide reform. With coordinated effort, Oklahoma has the potential to close the ACT performance gap, improve equity in educational outcomes, and expand postsecondary opportunities for all of its students.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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