Iowa State Board of Education

Executive Summary

November 18, 2026

Agenda Item:	Iowa LEAD Performance Standard Setting
State Board Goal(s):	Goal 2
State Board Role/Authority:	Iowa Code 256.7(28) outlines the State Board authority for adopting academic and performance standards.
Presenter(s):	Jay Pennington, Administrator Division of Teacher Quality and Innovation Cathy Welch, Co-Director, Iowa Testing Programs University of Iowa Eric Moyer, Lead Psychometrician Pearson
Attachment(s):	Three
Recommendation:	It is recommended that the State Board approve the recommendations for the cut scores for the Iowa LEAD assessment performance levels.
Background:	Pearson conducted a performance standard-setting process for the new Iowa LEAD assessment. Using an evidence-based approach, Iowa educators recommended cut scores aligned with the expectations outlined in the Performance Level Descriptors. These cut scores define four achievement levels: Below, Approaching, Meeting, and Exceeding Grade-Level Expectations. The performance levels indicate what a student knows and can demonstrate in a given grade and subject (i.e., English language arts and mathematics).

2026 Iowa Standard Setting
Board Executive Summary

Mathematics, Reading, and English Language Arts | Grades 3–11

November 2026 | Prepared by Pearson for the Iowa Department of Education

DECISION BEFORE THE BOARD

Requested action: Approve the recommended performance level cut scores for the new Iowa Learning Expectations and Academic Development (Iowa LEAD) assessments in Mathematics, Reading, and English Language Arts (ELA) for grades 3–11. Approval establishes the boundaries used as performance level cut scores to classify Spring 2026 student results into four performance levels.

OVERVIEW

Establishing performance levels for an assessment is a multi-step process, focused on establishing levels that are meaningful for all audiences that use the assessment data, including parents, teachers, administrators, and other groups. The purpose of each step in this process is to ensure the alignment between the content expectations, defined by the Iowa Academic Standards, the Iowa LEAD assessments, and the reporting of student results.

The following provides a high-level overview of the different steps used in this comprehensive performance level setting process.

Establishing Academic Standards (approved 2024)

- Academic standards define what students should know and be able to do, related to specific subjects and grades.
- New Iowa Academic Standards were developed drawing on research and numerous sources, including state departments of education, scholars, assessment developers, and professional organizations.
- The academic standards were reviewed by educators from kindergarten through college, parents, students, and members of the public.
- The new Iowa Academic Standards were approved by the State Board of Education in 2024.
- Iowa Academic Standards were implemented during the 2024-25 school year.

Development of New Assessment Test Specifications (July 2024-Dec. 2025)

- Test specifications for each Iowa LEAD assessment were developed by Iowa Testing Programs (ITP) to align the assessments with the new Iowa Academic Standards.
- Review of test specification completed by Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) and external review for alignment between standards and specifications.
- Items included on new assessments were reviewed by Iowa educators to ensure alignment with academic standards.
- Psychometric review of all test forms to establish evidence of validity and reliability.

Development of Performance Level Descriptors (February - May 2026)

- Defined the labels and policy descriptions for each of the four performance levels for the Iowa LEAD assessments.
- Content specialists developed draft performance level descriptors (PLDs) that would define content expectations associated with each performance level for each grade and subject being assessed.
- Educators and parents reviewed the PLDs for alignment to the Iowa Academic Standards and reasonable content expectations at each level.
- Revisions were made to draft PLDs based on the review.

Standard Setting Meeting (June 2026)

- A standard setting meeting was conducted in Des Moines, IA from June 8-12, 2026, including 27 committees of teachers from across Iowa.
- Teachers provided recommendations for the cut scores associated with the performance levels for each assessment.
- Using a well documented standard setting process, the Item Descriptor (ID) Matching process, panelists provided recommendations for the performance level cut scores based on the content expectations in the PLDs.
- A vertical articulation meeting was conducted to review the articulation of the recommended performance level cut scores across grades.

Reasonableness Review of Performance Level Recommendations (July-Oct. 2026)

- Based on policy expectations, leadership from ITP and the Iowa Department of Education reviewed the performance level cut score recommendations from the standard setting meeting.
- Cut scores from the standard setting were reviewed by the TAC which recommended a reasonableness review.
- A committee of teachers participated in a validation meeting to review the performance level cut scores, resulting from the reasonableness review meeting.

Community Engagement Sessions and Public Comment Period (August-Sept. 2026)

- Iowa Department of Education conducted meetings across the state to review the performance levels, the performance level descriptors, and the process for recommending cut scores.
- The Department completed a public comment period asking for input on the performance levels, the performance level descriptors, and changes to the assessment. Over 1,400 respondents provided comment. The number one respondent were parents followed by teachers demonstrating a wide array of input.

Reporting of Results (December 2026)

- After the final approval of the performance level cut scores, results from the spring 2026 administration of Iowa LEAD will be finalized and delivered to the various stakeholders.
- The Department and ITP are working to create materials for parents, teachers, schools and districts to read and interpret the results, including the change to four performance levels.

This document provides further details regarding the process and results from the performance level setting for the Iowa LEAD assessments.

STANDARD SETTING PROCESS AND RESULTS

1. What Standard Setting Does

When a new assessment is introduced, students receive scores, but those scores do not automatically indicate whether performance is Below, Approaching, Meeting, or Exceeding Grade-Level Expectations. Standard setting is the structured, evidence-based process used to recommend the score boundaries, or cuts, that separate those categories for reporting and to support meaningful understanding of the assessment results.

A useful distinction

The assessment produces the evidence of student performance. Iowa's performance level descriptors define the content-based performance level expectations, based on the Iowa academic standards. Standard setting connects the two by identifying the points on the score scale where performance on the assessment indicates one performance category transitions to the next.

Student achievement on each Iowa LEAD assessment is classified into four performance levels, which are used to represent meaningful differences in student performance on the assessments. The performance levels are defined by content expectations that delineate the knowledge and skills expected of students to be able to demonstrate in relation to academic content as defined by the academic standards.

The performance levels are described by policy descriptors and performance level descriptors (PLDs). The policy descriptors for the performance levels, shown below, provide general content and performance expectations for each level that are not subject or grade specific. The PLDs provide content expectations for each performance level specific to a subject and grade-level that define the knowledge and skills that students at this level are presumed to know and be able to demonstrate.

Iowa's Four Performance Levels

Below Grade-Level Expectations	Student is at the beginning stages of the on-grade knowledge and skill expectations described in the Iowa Academic Standards for Mathematics or English Language Arts for the grade level needed to be on track for future learning.
Approaching Grade-Level Expectations	Student is approaching the on-grade knowledge and skill expectations described in the Iowa Academic Standards for Mathematics or English Language Arts for the grade level needed to be on track for future learning.
Meeting Grade-Level Expectations	Student is meeting the on-grade knowledge and skill expectations described in the Iowa Academic Standards for Mathematics or English Language Arts for the grade level and is on track for future learning.
Exceeding Grade-Level Expectations	Student is exceeding the on-grade knowledge and skill expectations described in the Iowa Academic Standards for Mathematics or English Language Arts for the for the grade level, demonstrating thorough and consistent understanding of complex skills, and is on track for future learning.

Why new cuts were needed in 2026

- New standards and assessments. Iowa adopted new Mathematics and ELA standards in 2024, implemented them in 2024–2025 and 2025-2026, and administered aligned Iowa LEAD assessments operationally for the first time in Spring 2026.
- First reporting cycle. Because the assessments and score scales are new, performance-category boundaries must be established before results can be reported.

2. How the Standard Setting was Organized

Iowa educators met in Des Moines from June 8–12, 2026. The five-day design accommodated grade-level committees for Mathematics, Reading, and Language/Writing and culminated in cross-grade vertical articulation.

Committees and methods

Assessment	Committees	Method
Mathematics	9 grade-level committees; 10–17 members each	Item-Descriptor Matching
Reading	9 grade-level committees; 5–14 members within the ELA meeting structure	Item-Descriptor Matching
Language/Writing	9 grade-level committees; 5–14 members within the ELA meeting structure	Simplified Body of Work

The Standard Setting meeting was structured so that a given committee made cut score recommendations for each performance level for a single grade. Panelists were educators from across Iowa, selected to be representative of the different regions of the state and various student populations. As the individuals who have taught the new academic standard and have experience with the different student groups, they are in the best position to provide meaningful judgments to translate the content expectations in the PLDs to appropriate cut score recommendations on the assessment.

The standard setting committees included 155 panelists, with various roles in education across the state, as displayed in the table below. Individuals interested in participating in the standard setting meeting applied and were selected by the Iowa Department of Education.

Number of Panelists for Reading and Mathematics by Position*

Position	Reading	Mathematics
Teacher (K-12 Education)	49 (71.0%)	47 (68.1%)
Teacher (Higher Education)	0 (0.0%)	3 (4.3%)
Administrator (School)	3 (4.3 %)	3 (4.3%)
Administrator (District)	4 (5.8%)	0 (0.0%)
Other	13 (18.8%)	16 (23.2%)
Total	69 Panelists	69 Panelists

*Note: Some panelists did not complete the demographic survey, so the totals do not represent the full set of panelists

Number of Years Experience of Panelists for Reading and Mathematics*

Experience	Reading	Mathematics
1-5 years	5 (7.2%)	5 (7.2%)
6-10 years	10 (14.5%)	13 (18.8%)
11-15 years	14 (20.3%)	12 (17.4%)
16-20 years	7 (10.1%)	11 (15.9%)
More than 20 years	33 (47.8%)	28 (40.6%)
Total	69 Panelists	69 Panelists

*Note: Some panelists did not complete the demographic survey, so the totals do not represent the full set of panelists

Common preparation before judgments

As part of a standardized process, the facilitator of each committee led panelists through a research-based standard setting process that would result in recommendations for the cut scores associated with the performance levels that were based on the content expectations defined by the PLDs. Although there were different subjects, each committee was led through similar activities, which are defined below.

Orientation	Panelists reviewed the purpose of the meeting, expected outcomes, confidentiality and security requirements, and the materials they would use.
Assessment Review	Panelists reviewed the Iowa LEAD assessment design, examined the Spring 2026 assessment experience, item types, content expectations, and relevant scoring information. As a multi-stage adaptive assessment, for Reading and Mathematics, time was spent reviewing the administration and scoring of this type of administration.
Performance Level Descriptor Review	Panelists studied the performance level descriptors, which define the knowledge and skills expected at each level. The purpose of this discussion was to establish a common understanding of what knowledge and skills students classified with this level are expected to demonstrate.

Standard Setting Process Training	The facilitator of the meeting provided comprehensive training on the specific standard setting judgment process and how panelists would record their individual judgments. Panelists completed a practice judgment activity so that questions or misunderstandings could be addressed before operational judgments began.
Individual Standard Setting Judgments And Feedback Discussions	Panelists completed an individual judgment round using the specific process defined for their assessment. After panelists completed their individual judgment round, they reviewed summaries of the panel's results, discussed reasons for differences, and then had opportunities to revise their judgments. Discussion supported shared understanding but did not require consensus.

Throughout the process, panelists completed evaluation surveys to record their understanding of the process and provide an opportunity to indicate their agreement with the cut score recommendations.

3. Mathematics and Reading: Modified Item-Descriptor Matching

The Item-Descriptor (ID) Matching methodology was used for Mathematics and Reading. The method asked educators to compare the knowledge and skills needed to answer each item successfully with the descriptions of knowledge and skills expected outlined in the PLDs for each performance level. Each panelist was provided an ordered item set of questions from the spring 2026 assessment. The item set was not the entire set but rather a sample of questions from easy to difficult covering the continuum of ability needed to answer an item correctly.

Once panelists had associated each item in the ordered item set with a performance level, panelists identified where the evidence indicated a transition from one performance level to the next.

What panelists were deciding

For each boundary, panelists considered: "At what point in the ordered item set does the knowledge and skills needed to answer the item correctly become most consistent with the next performance level?"

The four judgment rounds

The process used during the standard setting was a modification of the ID matching method. In this method, the items in Round 1 were not presented in item difficulty order, but in administration order. This allowed panelists to review items associated with passage sets, like in Reading, as the students were administered the items. This also delayed performance level cut score recommendations until rounds 2 through 4.

Round 1	Round 1: Match items to performance levels. Panelists independently assigned each item to the performance level whose descriptor most closely matched the knowledge and skills needed for a correct response.
Rounds 2 and 3	Rounds 2 and 3: Reconsider and recommend cuts. Using items from the ordered item set, in difficulty order, panelists assigned each item to a performance level, by matching the PLD with the expected knowledge and skills from the item. They were able to revise their item judgments from the previous round based on feedback and discussions from the panels. The panelists also provided cut score recommendations, which best represented the transition between levels.
Round 4	Round 4: Consider consequences with content evidence. Based on panelists' judgments, feedback discussion, and impact data, they made their final grade-level judgments for each performance level cut score.

What feedback was provided to panelists between judgment rounds

- Individual item judgment agreement. The percentage of panelists that selected each performance level for an item.
- Individual cut score agreement. A graph showing the distribution of panelists' cut scores for each performance level.
- Impact data. The distribution of students classified into each performance level based on the recommended cut scores.

The cut score recommendation for the committee was the median of panelists' individual cut score recommendations, limiting the influence of unusually high or low judgments.

4. Vertical Articulation – Mathematics and Reading

After grade-level work was complete, selected panelists reviewed recommendations across grades 3–11. The purpose was to identify discontinuities that could not be justified by changes in standards, test design, or student performance, and to make limited adjustments where needed so the expectations formed a coherent progression. Separate articulation work was conducted for Mathematics and Reading.

Content based articulation

The purpose of the articulation meeting was to ensure that the recommended performance level cut scores represented a cohesive set of expectations based on the content expectations as defined in the PLDs. The following steps were conducted to complete the vertical articulation.

Across Grade PLD Review	Panelists reviewed the PLDs for grades adjacent to the grades that they were assigned, so panelists that reviewed grades 4 and 5 reviewed PLDs for grades 3 and 6. During this review, they looked for the articulation of expectations for the same performance levels across grades.
Impact Data Review	Based on the review of the PLDs across grades, the panelists defined expectations for the impact data across the grades. When the impact data for all the grades was presented, the expectations were used to evaluate the cut score recommendations.
Vertical Articulation	The panelists were led through an articulation process using an interactive spreadsheet, where performance level cut scores could be reviewed and adjusted. The panelists worked through multiple rounds of review until the impact data reflected their expectations across grades.

The tables present the Mathematics and Reading performance level cut score recommendations using the ordered item set sequence numbers after vertical articulation.

Recommended Mathematics Cuts

Grade	Approaching cut	Meeting cut	Exceeding cut
3	7 (−0.9)	23 (0.0)	52 (1.6)
4	7 (−0.9)	22.5 (−0.1)	50 (1.6)
5	6 (−0.8)	21 (0.0)	51.5 (1.5)
6	9 (−0.6)	21.5 (0.1)	50.5 (1.5)
7	10 (−0.5)	22 (0.1)	49 (1.6)
8	10 (−0.5)	23 (0.1)	47 (1.6)
9	8 (−0.4)	18 (0.1)	51 (1.6)
10	8 (−0.5)	21 (0.1)	53 (1.8)
11	8.5 (−0.5)	24.5 (0.2)	52 (1.5)

Recommended Reading Cuts

Grade	Approaching cut	Meeting cut	Exceeding cut
3	8 (−0.7)	25 (0.0)	51 (1.2)
4	6 (−0.8)	27 (0.1)	54 (1.4)
5	6 (−0.7)	32 (0.1)	53 (1.1)
6	10 (−0.6)	31 (0.1)	57 (1.5)
7	10 (−0.5)	29 (0.1)	45 (1.1)
8	10 (−0.6)	32 (0.1)	55 (1.2)
9	8 (−0.6)	37 (0.2)	57 (1.5)
10	6 (−0.6)	34 (0.2)	53 (1.8)
11	6 (−0.6)	37 (0.4)	52 (1.6)

How to read the table. The three cut columns identify the boundaries between adjacent performance levels. The first number is the item sequence of the item in the ordered item sequence selected as the lower boundary of the performance level. The second number, in parentheses, represents the relative difficulty of the item selected as the lower boundary of the performance level on a psychometrically determined difficulty scale. Lower values represent lower expected performance; higher values represent greater expected performance.

5. Language/Writing: Simplified Body of Work

Language/Writing required a different method because the assessment combines a trait scored essay with multiple-choice items. Rather than ordering individual items by difficulty, panelists reviewed profiles showing how students performed at every available raw-score point and determined which performance level was most consistent with each profile.

Evidence included in each score-point profile

- Essay traits. For each of four independently scored traits, panelists reviewed the percentage of students receiving each score from 1 through 5, which is the range of possible scores for each essay trait.
- Overall essay performance. Each essay trait is added to get an overall essay score. Panelists reviewed the distribution of total essay scores from 4 through 20.
- Multiple-choice performance. Panelists reviewed the distribution of total correct scores across all multiple-choice items and the percentage answering each item correctly.
- Supporting content evidence. Panelists had access to the form, the essay prompt, multiple-choice items, trait rubrics, and exemplar papers illustrating student performance at each trait score.

The two judgment rounds

The process used during the standard setting for Language/Writing involved panelists completing two independent judgment rounds.

Round 1	Round 1: Match raw scores with performance levels. Panelists independently reviewed the score profile for each raw score point. They considered the knowledge and skills a student earning that raw score would be expected to demonstrate, then panelists classified each raw score point into the performance level it most closely represented. Panelists then used the pattern of their raw score classifications to identify the transition between adjacent performance levels, recommending a raw score cut for each performance level.
Round 2	Rounds 2 and 3: Reconsider and recommend cuts. Panelists would have the opportunity to revise their raw score performance level cuts, based on the feedback discussions from round 1. Using the revised raw score judgments, the panelists provided their final performance level cut score recommendations.

The cut score recommendation for the committee was the median of panelists' individual cut score recommendations, limiting the influence of unusually high or low judgments.

To articulate the Language/Writing cut scores with the Reading cut scores, the panelists were presented with the impact data for Reading and ELA for the specific grade, using the recommended cuts from the standard setting committees. The panelists from the Language/Writing committees were able to adjust their cut score recommendations based on this review. They could not adjust the cut score recommendations from the Reading committees.

6. English Language Arts Articulation

Important reporting distinction

Students receive a Reading performance level and an overall ELA performance level. They do not receive a separate Language/Writing performance category. For that reason, Language/Writing judgments were evaluated in terms of their contribution to the combined ELA result.

English Language Arts (ELA) performance on the Iowa LEAD is a combination of performance on the Reading and Language/Writing assessments. The recommended performance level cut scores for ELA are determined by averaging the scale scores associated with the performance level cut scores for Reading and Language/Writing. To determine the final recommended ELA performance level, a vertical articulation process was utilized.

Reading Cut Scores	Reading cut score values were converted to the reporting scale and served as one component of the combined ELA calculation. Since Reading scale scores and performance levels were already articulated, these were held constant.
Recommended ELA Cuts	Recommended performance level cut scores for ELA were determined by calculating the average of the Reading and Language/Writing scale score cuts.
ELA Impact Data	Panelists were presented with the impact data for ELA across the grades, based on the recommended ELA cuts. They were also presented with the impact data for Reading across the grades.
ELA Articulation	Based on their review of the Reading impact data and expectations for Language/Writing, the panelists used an interactive spreadsheet where they could adjust the Language/Writing cut scores to change the ELA cuts, where the impact was not reasonable.

The final performance level cut score recommendations for Reading and Language/Writing were determined from the final ELA articulation meeting.

7. Final Standard Setting Review

Standard setting combines professional judgment with empirical evidence. A typical part of the process includes a reasonableness review of the recommended performance level cut scores from the standard setting committees against policy expectations.

Technical Advisory Committee review

During a regular meeting of the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) for the Iowa LEAD assessment, the members of the committee reviewed the performance level cut score recommendations and results from the standard setting and vertical articulation meeting. From the discussion regarding the cut score recommendations, the TAC recommended that the department conduct a policy reasonableness review and, if necessary, adjust the cut scores to address any policy concerns. To ensure that the standard setting recommendations were reflected, the recommendation was to adjust cut scores, when needed, within a standard error of measurement.

Department reasonableness review

Department staff then considered the articulated recommendations from a statewide policy perspective, including Spring 2026 impact data and the ranges of committee recommendations. The review was intended to support educator judgments while ensuring that the full set of performance levels would function appropriately for the assessment program's intended use. This ensured that the Mathematics and Reading recommendations were judged reasonably. The ELA review identified a need for additional attention to the combined effect of the Language/Writing recommendations in relation to policy expectations and uses.

Based on the recommendation from the TAC, the department explored adjusting the ELA performance level cut scores by changing the recommended performance level cuts for Language/Writing within one standard error of measure.

Standards validation for revised ELA

To ensure that the adjustments to the ELA and Language/Writing performance level cuts reflected panelists' intentions, a standards validation meeting was conducted. On October 14, 2026, members of the original Language/Writing committees participated in a validation committee. During the validation meeting, the panelists reviewed the original standard setting process and results, then they were introduced to the reasonableness review. The adjusted performance level cut scores for Language/Writing and ELA were presented, and the panelists provided some final change recommendations based on the impact data presented.

Reference:

Ferrara, S., Perie, M., & Johnson, E. (2008). Matching the judgmental task with standard setting panelist expertise: The item-descriptor (ID) matching procedure. Journal of Applied Testing Technology, 9(1), 1–22.

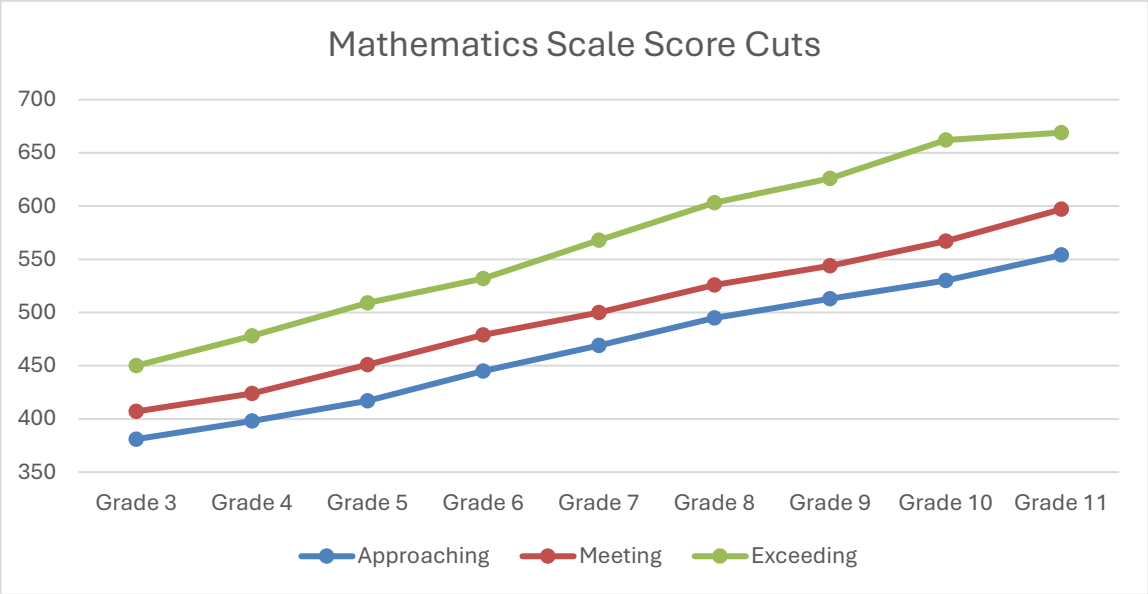
Cizek, G. J. & Bunch M.B. (2007). *Standard Setting.* Sage Publications, London.

8. Performance Level Cut Score Recommendations

The following presents the performance level cut scores recommended for each assessment along with the resulting impact data. The impact data is the distribution of students classified into each performance level when the recommended cut scores are applied to student performance from the spring 2026 administration.

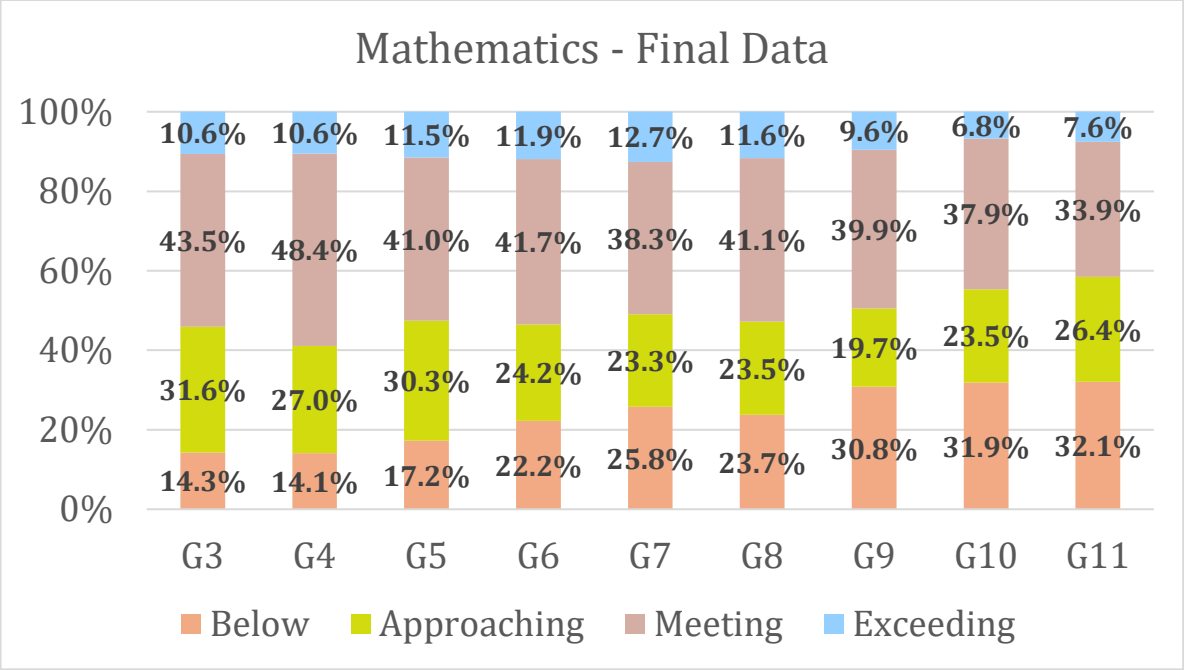
Mathematics Performance Level Cut Scores and Impact Data

Mathematics Recommended Scale Score Cuts



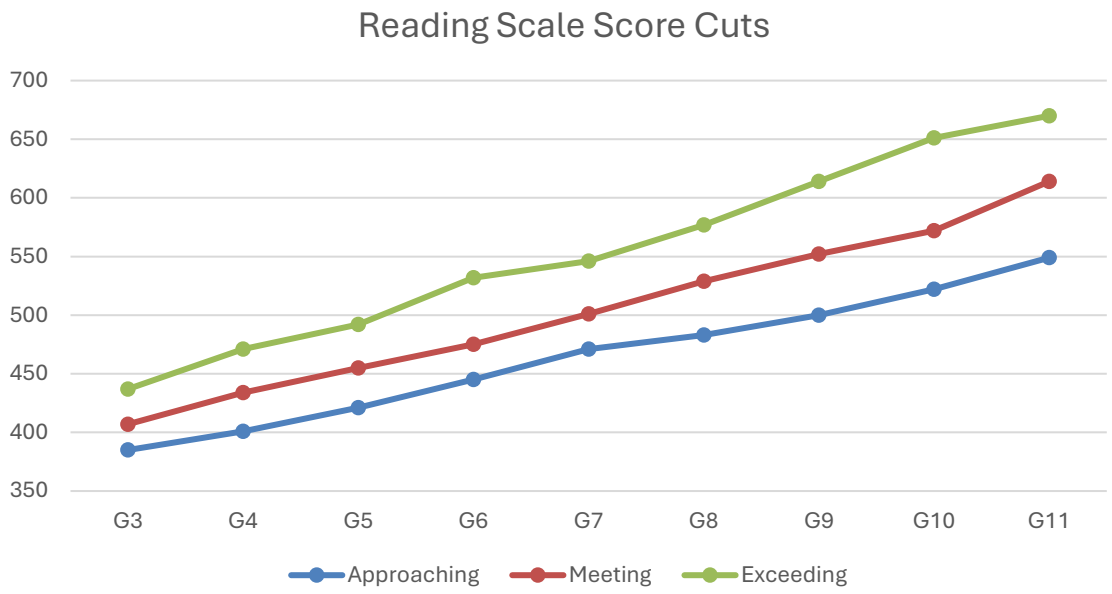
	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11
Approaching	381	398	417	445	469	495	513	530	554
Meeting	407	424	451	479	500	526	544	567	597
Exceeding	450	478	509	532	568	603	626	662	669

Mathematics Impact Data



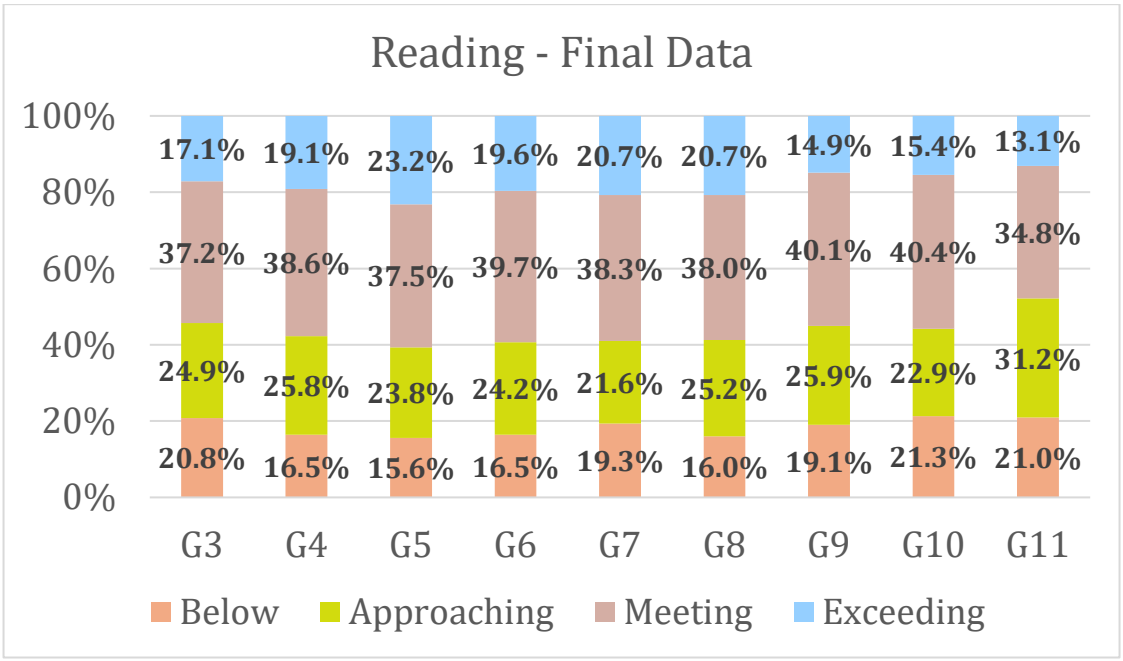
Reading Performance Level Cut Scores and Impact Data

Reading Recommended Scale Score Cuts



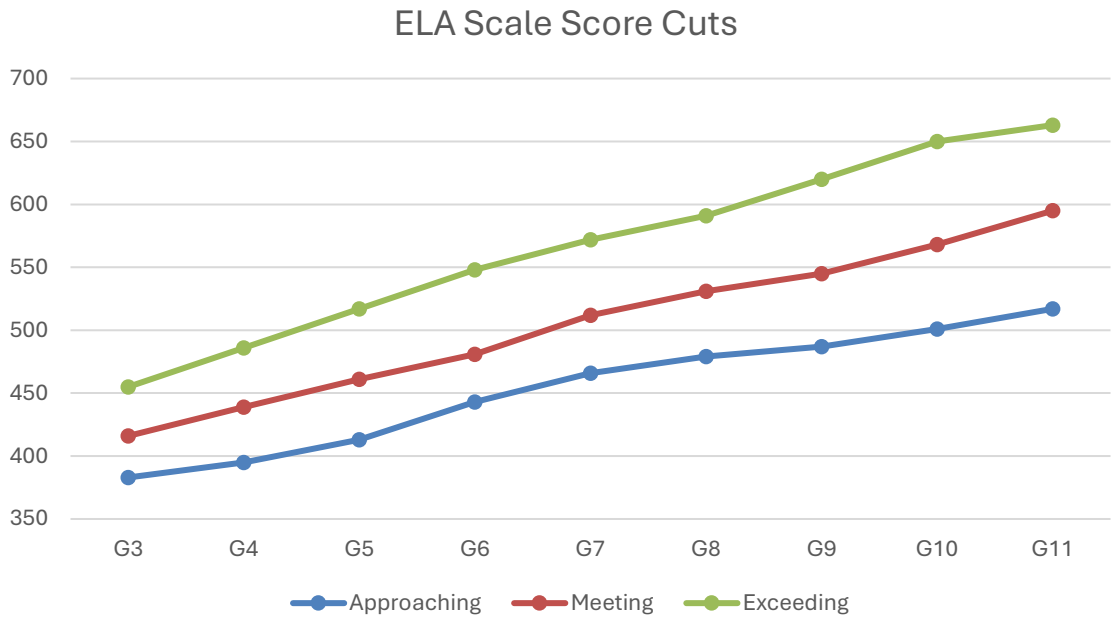
	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11
Approaching	385	401	421	445	471	483	500	522	549
Meeting	407	434	455	475	501	529	552	572	614
Exceeding	437	471	492	532	546	577	614	651	670

Reading Impact Data



ELA Performance Level Cut Scores and Impact Data

ELA Recommended Scale Score Cuts



	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11
Approaching	383	395	413	443	466	479	487	501	517
Meeting	416	439	461	481	512	531	545	568	595
Exceeding	455	486	517	548	572	591	620	650	663

ELA Impact Data

