

Executive Summary

Between 2012 and 2025, cumulative high school GPAs in North Dakota have increased, while average ACT scores have decreased. Additionally, students with similar GPAs have progressively scored lower on the ACT, with fewer achieving a score of 24 or higher. This suggests that high school GPAs have become inflated relative to ACT scores. GPA inflation has led to a loss of differentiation among student data—if progressively more students have a 4.0, distinguishing between students' academic abilities becomes increasingly difficult.

Introduction and description of data

The purpose of this study is to compare student high school GPAs in North Dakota to other measures of academic performance to determine if high school GPA is becoming an artificially inflated measure of student performance. Students in this data set graduated on-time from a North Dakota high school between the 2011-12 and 2024-25 school years, and all GPA used in this study is standardized to a 4.0 scale. Additionally, students in this study took at least one ACT exam prior to graduating from high school; if a student took multiple exams, their highest ACT composite score was used.

Average GPA compared to average ACT composite

Table 1 highlights the year-over-year increase in average GPA for graduating students, rising from approximately 3.04 in 2012 to 3.26 by 2025. While this trend alone might suggest improved academic performance, it is accompanied by a steady decline in ACT composite scores over the same period, dropping from an average of 20.7 in 2012 to 19.7 in 2025.

Table 1: Average ACT scores and high school GPA by graduation year

Graduation year	Avg. ACT	Avg. GPA
2012	20.7	3.041
2013	20.8	3.094
2014	20.9	3.091
2015	21.0	3.120
2016	20.8	3.105
2017	20.7	3.140
2018	20.7	3.163
2019	20.3	3.155
2020	20.0	3.201
2021	19.9	3.216
2022	19.5	3.227
2023	19.9	3.257
2024	19.8	3.252
2025	19.7	3.264

To further examine the relationship between changes in ACT composite scores and high school GPA, Figure 1 highlights a gradual decline in average ACT composite scores for students with comparable GPAs. For instance, students graduating in 2012 with a 3.7 GPA achieved an average ACT composite score of 24.3. By 2025, this average had dropped to 21.2. This downward trend is evident across all GPA ranges.

Average ACT score by graduation year and GPA

4.0	27.5	27.5	27.4	27.5	27.5	27.3	27.4	27.3	26.5	26.4	25.9	25.8	25.2	25.4
3.9	26	25.6	25.8	25.7	25.2	24.9	25.3	24.6	23.9	24	23	23.2	23.1	23
3.8	24.9	24.6	24.4	24.6	24.4	23.8	24	23.6	23.1	22.4	21.5	22	21.7	21.8
3.7	24.3	23.8	23.9	23.9	23.6	22.9	23.2	22.6	21.8	21.5	20.9	21.2	20.8	21.2
3.6	23.1	22.8	23.2	23	23	22.4	22.4	21.7	21.3	20.7	20.1	20.6	20.4	20.2
3.5	22.3	22.3	21.9	22.1	21.8	21.7	21.5	21.1	20.5	20.1	19.7	20	19.7	19.8
3.4	21.8	22.2	21.9	21.7	21.3	20.9	20.8	20.2	19.7	19.6	19	19.4	19.7	19.3
3.3	21.3	21.1	21.5	21.2	20.7	20.7	20.6	19.6	19.3	18.9	18.8	18.8	18.8	18.8
3.2	20.4	20.8	20.7	20.3	20.2	19.8	19.9	19.2	18.8	18.6	18.4	18.7	18.7	17.8
3.1	20.2	19.9	20.2	20.1	19.9	20	19.5	19	18.5	18.1	17.7	17.9	18.4	17.8
3.0	19.7	19.9	19.7	19.5	19.5	19	18.7	18.3	18	17.9	17.7	17.5	17.5	18
2.9	19.1	18.9	19.3	18.9	18.7	18.9	18.7	18.3	18.3	17.7	16.8	17.2	17.4	17.6
2.8	19.1	18.5	18.8	18.6	18.7	18.4	17.8	17.8	17.8	17.2	17.1	16.8	17.3	17
2.7	19	18.6	18.5	18.5	18.2	18.1	18.1	17.7	16.8	16.9	16.5	16.6	17	16.7
2.6	18.2	18	18.3	18.1	18.2	17.5	17.5	17.1	16.4	16.9	16.6	16.1	16.8	16.5
2.5	17.9	17.7	17.7	17.5	17.9	17.6	17.6	17	16.8	16.2	15.8	16.7	16.6	16.6
2.4	17.4	17.5	17.3	17.9	17.7	17.4	17.2	16.5	16	16.1	16.4	16.2	16	15.8
2.3	17.1	16.7	16.9	17.3	17.1	16.6	16.7	16.5	16.1	15.9	15.5	16.2	15.7	15.8
2.2	17.2	16.3	17	16.9	16.9	16.8	16.7	16.2	16	15.9	15.8	16.2	16.5	15.2
2.1	16.3	16.3	16.3	16.4	16.9	16.7	16.3	16.2	15.7	15.7	15.5	15.8	16	15.3
2.0	16	16.1	16.5	16.4	16.5	15.9	15.9	15.9	15.9	15.4	15.6	15.4	15.1	14.8
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025

Figure 1: Average ACT score by graduation year and GPA, 2012-2025 ND high school graduates

To qualify for the North Dakota State Scholarship as Post-Secondary or Workforce Ready, North Dakota students need an ACT Composite score of at least 24. Figure 2 illustrates that, similar to the declining average ACT scores, the percentage of students with similar GPAs meeting or exceeding this requirement has steadily decreased year over year. For example, students graduating with a 3.7 GPA in 2012 met this threshold 60% of the time, compared to just 26% of 2025 graduates with the same GPA.

Percent of students scoring 24 and above on ACT

By graduation year and GPA

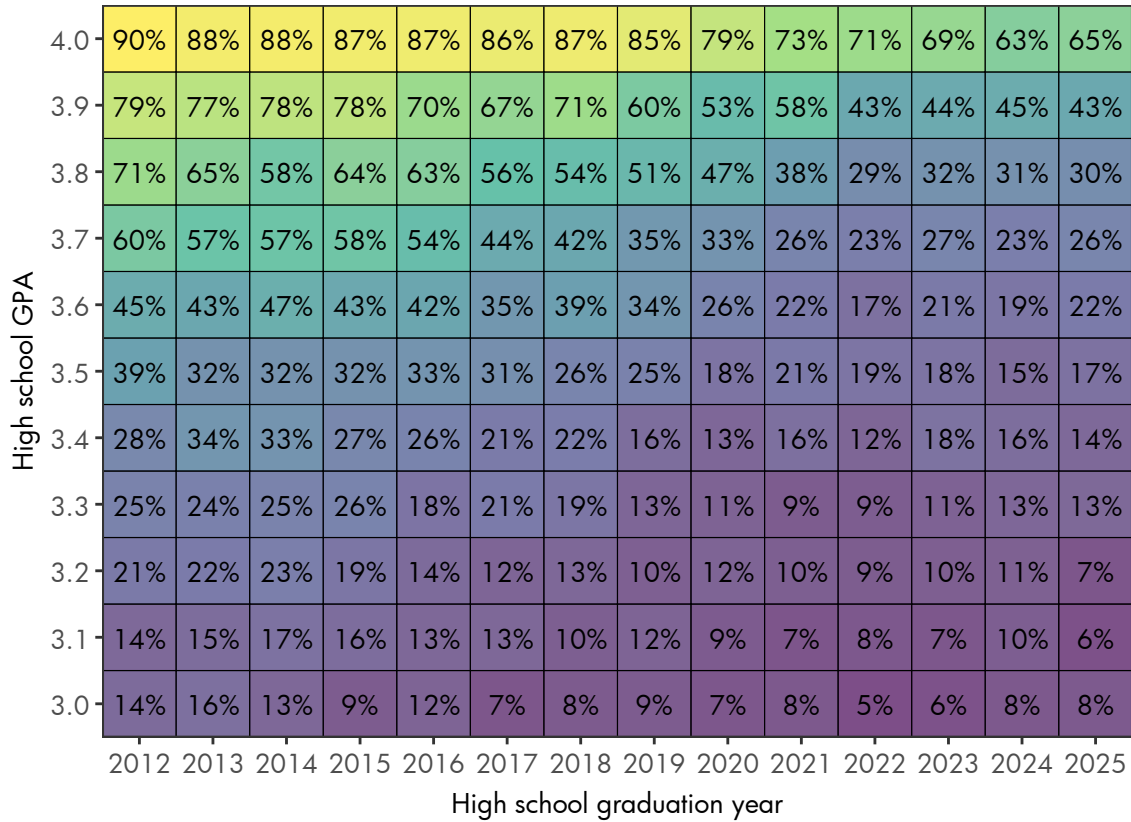


Figure 2: Rate of students scoring 24 or above on ACT Composite exam, 2012-2025 graduates

GPA bottleneck

While GPA inflation relative to ACT composite scores is evident over the study period, another phenomenon is emerging, which I will call the 'GPA bottleneck.' As high school GPAs continue to rise, an increasing proportion of students achieve very high GPAs, resulting in a loss of granularity. This raises the question: If everyone has a 4.0, how do we distinguish between them?

Figure 3 makes this compression visible. Comparing graduates from 2012–2013 to those from 2024–2025, the later cohort is heavily concentrated at the high end of the GPA distribution — one that is now pressing against the 4.0 ceiling with no room left to expand.

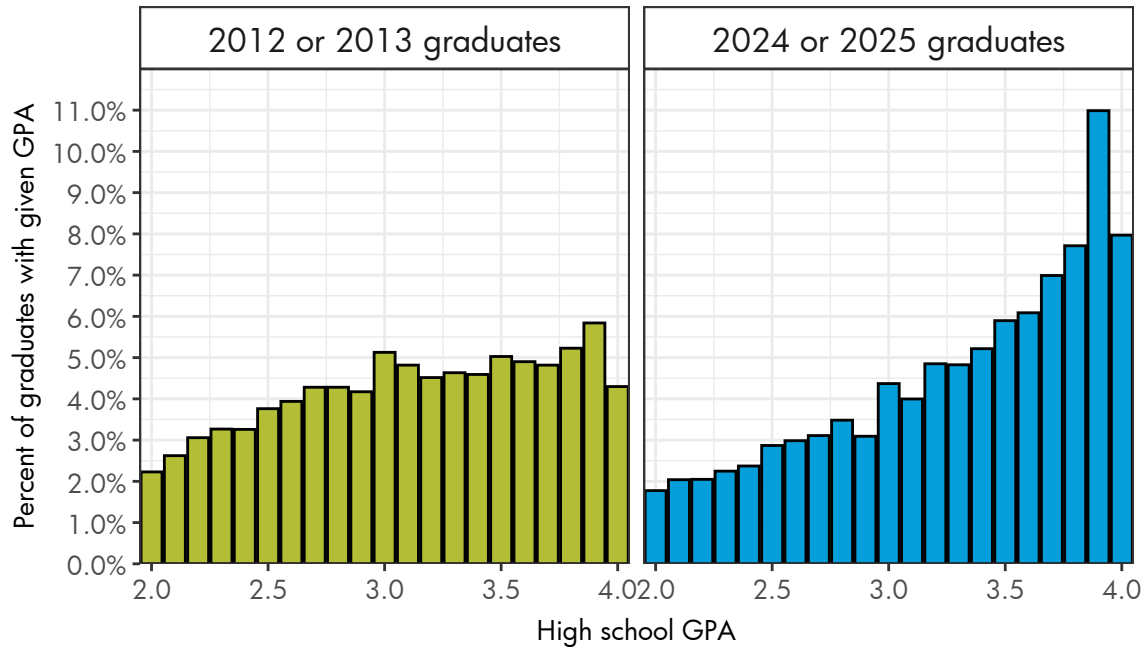


Figure 3: Percent of graduates with given GPA: 2012-2013 graduates and 2024-2025 graduates