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On Education

Oh, the Joys of Standardized Testing: Junior Jitters

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Article Last Updated: 12/07/2007 01:49:41 PM EST

Rising high school juniors and their families are often filled with questions and concerns as winter approaches. This week, I'll share my take on some of the questions I commonly get asked about junior year standardized testing.

As there's no such thing as one-size-fits-all advice, please be sure to check with school or private consultants for what's best for your child. Also, keep in mind that SATs, ACTs and the rest will not determine your child's lifetime of happiness or success.

Do junior year PSATs count?

Colleges don't see PSAT scores or rely upon them in admissions, beyond sending out marketing materials to students who choose to share their scores. Top scorers on the PSAT qualify for a letter of commendation or semi-finalist status. Beyond this paper recognition, some of these high scoring juniors win scholarships from National Merit, sponsoring companies or colleges.

Juniors who took the PSAT in October will receive PSAT scores with a detailed diagnostic breakdown of their answers in December. The December PSAT score report that your student receives at school can act as a wake up call showing areas for practice and

improvement. Asking a school guidance counselor, private college consultant or tutor to review your student's scores can be helpful. And, hang on to the score report because the personalized diagnostic information can be very useful when searching for strategies for improvement.

When should my junior take the SATs?

Juniors must plan on taking SATs in the spring. Students who are happy with their PSAT results should sign up for the January or March test, watching out for conflicts with January midterms. Unhappy students should schedule their preparation so they will be ready for at least one spring test, May or June. All students should be prepared to take the SAT at least twice.

Completing testing by the end of junior year puts students in a happy place for the summer. Don't worry if your child's sports, rehearsals or Halo 2 obsession makes this schedule impossible. Sometimes students shine on fall tests: Senior year scores are fine for regular-decision applications and October scores usually work for early decision. Do check individual college requirements in planning your child's testing schedule.

How should my junior prepare for the SATs?

In these crazy days of college admissions frenzy, options abound for test preparation. Often students need instruction, showing them where they're going wrong and reinforcing new test-taking strategies. Students left to repeat mistakes practicing on their own can become frustrated. Prep courses and tutors abound; just make sure the teaching approach and practice materials you're buying make sense for your student's needs.

Any alternatives to the SAT?

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If your child is satisfied with his or her PSAT performance, stick with the SAT. Why add another test to an already stressful year?

Students disappointed with SAT results might shop around. The ACT, now widely accepted by colleges across the country, is a real choice. Some differences to consider:

* ACT is considered straightforward, testing school achievement, whereas the SAT is called tricky by many.

* ACT tests scientific reasoning while SAT omits science.

* ACT allows students to choose which scores to send to colleges. Students can take and retake the ACT without anyone knowing, whereas the SAT reports all scores.

* Most colleges use the ACT composite score earned on one test; students can't combine their highest sub-section scores from different test dates. In contrast, most colleges select students' highest SAT sub-scores, adding, for example, May reading scores to June math and writing scores, if those were the highest.

Do all colleges require standardized tests for admissions?

Some colleges across the country are score optional. For example, selective colleges like Dickinson, Goucher and Bowdoin require no standardized tests for admissions. Others such as Connecticut College or Pitzer have more complicated policies allowing students to demonstrate academic achievement in various ways. Each year, more and more colleges adopt this more flexible approach. Check out www.fairtest.org, listing these colleges and their policies.

What about SAT Subject Tests?

SAT Subject Tests are only essential for some of the most selective colleges. Consider the requirements of colleges on your student's list. Students are often most successful scheduling subject tests in May or June of junior year, often following AP tests, or in senior year.

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