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## On Education

### Oh The Joys of Standardized Testing!

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'Tis the season for lots of questions in anticipation of the upcoming round of college admissions tests for high schoolers. Knowing what's ahead and setting up a reasonable schedule for preparation and test taking can remove a bit of the stress from the equation. (So can leaving home or taking medications available by prescription, by the way.)

I will try to provide advice based upon questions frequently asked in my college consulting practice. This week I'll focus on rising sophomores.

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, always keep in mind that SATs, ACTs and the rest will not determine your child's lifetime of happiness or success.

Do sophomore PSATs count?

Sophomores who took the October PSAT this year had a risk-free chance for practice on standardized tests. Sophomore scores count for absolutely nothing. The score sheets provide helpful diagnostic information for students, but otherwise the test doesn't matter.

I have never, ever, heard any good reason for

making a kid study or prepare for the sophomore PSAT. Sure, understanding the directions and trying a few questions in the pamphlet provided at registration are sensible ideas. But making your kid do more at this early stage isn't productive. Sophomores currently taking geometry still can benefit from the PSAT score information as long as they realize that they have not yet learned all of the math on the test. Sophomores should savor this low-cost, no-worry diagnostic opportunity: a rare bargain in the upcoming college admissions process.

When sophomores receive their PSAT results, what's a parent to do?

The most important thing sophomore parents can do is to remain calm when the PSAT results come back in December. The gathering of vibes in your house when you hear those scores will be critical for setting the tone for the next two years of the college admissions process.

Don't be surprised if your kid says "I don't care," when showing you abysmal scores. That teenage instant message, when translated, usually means "I'm scared that my lousy scores have disappointed my parents and myself."

Students need reassurance. With practice and another year or two of school, scores can improve dramatically. Also, remember that an increasing number of great colleges are now test-optional, and high school performance continues to be the single most important factor for college admissions. Don't let PSATs suggest failure for your child.

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

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helpful. And hang on to the score report, because the personalized diagnostic information can be very useful when searching for strategies for improvement.

Q. How can parents help students improve their scores?

Despite what my kids say, encouraging your student to do daily reading, vocabulary building and math practice does not qualify as child abuse. Your kids might finally listen after the reality check of the PSAT score report.

Sophomore year is a good time for parents to think about the many resources available for improving student success on standardized testing. Asking around about test prep companies and local tutors is smart. So is thinking realistically about your child's extracurricular commitments in order to plan for test preparation as junior year approaches. Furthermore, special testing accommodations, like extra time for documented learning disabilities, need to be arranged with the testing company and the school long before the test dates.

Sophomore year is also a good time for students to consider the ACT. Online samples at [www.act.org](http://www.act.org) and [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com) are good starting points to assess your student's comfort with the different test options.

Q. Should my sophomore worry about SAT subject tests?

It's usually not a good idea for freshmen or sophomores to take SAT subject tests. In my experience, the first-year high school courses, like biology or chemistry, usually do not line up with the depth of knowledge required for those SAT subject tests.

Juniors completing AP biology or chemistry courses, though, are extremely well-prepared to ace those tests by May or June of their junior year. Seniors enrolled in AP biology, chemistry or physics are often prepared to succeed on those SAT subject tests by fall of senior year. Those senior-year scores could make it in time for early decision and early action at most schools.

Also, pre-calculus usually helps on the Math SAT 2. But even accelerated math students taking pre-calculus as sophomores often do best by waiting (and practicing) for junior year.

Finally, it could turn out that the colleges on your child's list don't require these additional subject tests. Why rush?

Next week's column will focus on questions commonly asked by rising high school juniors and their parents.

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