

## Standardized Testing

Sophomore Parent Newsletter from New Trier's Post-High School Counseling Office

Pulses race and hearts beat more quickly when the topic of standardized testing arises - particularly college testing. This newsletter is designed to introduce the process and alleviate some parental anxiety along the way, so students may feel less nervous as well.

Standardized testing has changed significantly over the past few years, and the ACT company has retired their test progression of the eighth grade Explore and the ninth or tenth grade PLAN to replace them with testing more in line with the federal Common Core program. However, because the PLAN test was so valuable with tips on study skills and career clusters, ACT reintroduced a newer, sleeker version called the Pre-ACT.

The Pre-ACT test is an assessment designed for the fall of the sophomore year. It is also designed to introduce students to the format and expectations of the ACT, and predicts an ACT score. The Pre-ACT score is the predicted ACT score now; there is a one-to-one ratio for the scores. Although sophomore year is far too early to worry about predicting an ACT score, the test may be used as a way to determine your student's educational strengths as well as disciplines where additional attention may be needed.

If your sophomore is enrolled in a four-level science or social studies course and is doing exceedingly well, he or she might consider taking an SAT Subject Test in May or June this year. The SAT Subject Tests are used only by the most highly selective colleges; there are currently only a few colleges that require this testing, but many recommend it. These tests are designed for students to demonstrate superior knowledge and understanding of specific subject areas, such as specific social studies areas, science disciplines, for instance. They differ from the AP tests in that the AP tests are not designed for admission consideration, as the SAT Subject Tests are; AP testing is used to grant proficiency credit for college-level courses.

New Trier's post-high school counselors recommend that highly achieving sophomores in the high honors sciences or social studies courses might consider taking the Subject Test in that corresponding subject. Students are referred to their teachers for individual conversations about the tests. Recognizing that this is extremely early in the student's

academic career, we believe that it is best to take the exam closest to the time the student is finishing the class so the information is fresh in his or her head. Students most typically take the Subject Tests in May or June of the junior year or October of the senior year.

New Trier's post-high school counselors field a number of calls from parents interested in taking test preparation during the summer after the sophomore year to test in the fall of the junior year. Since the ACT is an achievement test and is aligned with the typical high school curriculum of a second-semester junior, prepping and testing this early – before the junior program has even begun – may prove detrimental to the student. Sometimes test scores are quite low with this strategy, particularly if students have not taken second-year algebra, as they would not have covered this in class before taking the test.

If your student's curriculum is typical, the post-high school counselors recommend juniors consider registering for a national ACT in December or February of the junior year for a baseline score without test preparation. If the score is inconsistent with the student's academic performance and does not meet his or her expectations, there is plenty of time for test prep in the spring and summer before an April, June, or September ACT. New Trier's post-high school counselors are not able to recommend or publicize information about test prep agencies.

The ACT is a test based on the completion of a typical high school curriculum through the spring of the junior year. In other words, this test is an achievement test and is designed for students in their second semester of the junior year. Many students in the New Trier community take this test earlier; as indicated previously, while some score quite well, other students who struggle in school and on tests should be cautioned against giving an early score too much weight.

The PSAT, or preliminary SAT (it is no longer called the scholastic aptitude test, but is just the SAT now), is designed for the fall of the junior year. At its most basic level, the PSAT predicts future SAT scores, and having a PSAT allows counselors to compare PSAT and Pre-ACT scores to see if students naturally might perform better on an SAT or an ACT. All colleges accept either ACT or SAT scores for admission consideration; gone are any preferences by colleges. In addition, strong students who are

superb test takers might qualify for national recognition and scholarship money through the National Merit Scholarship Program just by taking the PSAT in the fall of the junior year. Results of the PSAT will be sent home at the end of February of next year.

The state of Illinois has contracted with the College Board (the SAT company) to provide a state-supported (paid) SAT in the spring of the junior year; this is a state of Illinois graduation requirement. The writing test will be included as a mandatory section of the examination.

There have been major changes in the SAT. Because the aptitude test has fallen out of favor with the general public, fewer and fewer students were taking the SAT. The test has now changed to be more like the ACT than ever before; in fact, it has morphed from an aptitude test to an achievement test, so instead of predicting a student's potential, it now, like the ACT, reflects a student's academic achievement through the majority of the junior year. Therefore, the more core academic courses a student takes and the better the student does in those courses, the better the SAT (or ACT) scores are likely to be. The writing section is now optional, and on one portion of the math section, calculators are permitted. The critical reading section is now called "evidence-based reading and writing" and students will interpret charts, graphs, and paragraphs for contextual responses. There is no longer a penalty for guessing on the SAT.

Students are always encouraged to report scores to New Trier; we consider all scores confidential and will use them for guidance purposes only. Standardized test scores are not included on the student transcripts. Students never have to report scores sight unseen to colleges, but if cost is an issue, may wish to go ahead and use the free score reporting service. If higher scores are earned later, colleges are more than happy to replace lower scores. They always want to see students at their best!

All of the information pertinent to the junior year will be repeated next year. The post-high school counselors wanted to make sure that parents know what the sequencing of the exams is and not to worry too much about them. We trust this helps.

Previous newsletters can be found here:

<http://www.newtrier.k12.il.us/phsc/>