

PSAT in Perspective

Scores were released from CollegeBoard on Wednesday, December 11, 2019 for students who took the PSAT in October. While this may be a source of excitement or anxiety for some students, it is important for all students to remember that no test will ever define a person, nor will it ever single-handedly determine college admission. Understanding what the test is and how testing can impact the college application process will allow students and families to make decisions about how best to use test results. Some of the most frequently asked questions are:

1. What are the SAT and ACT? When are they taken and by whom?
2. What is the PSAT? Why are all the high school students taking it?
3. When and how should my student prepare for testing?
4. What does NMSQT mean?

Standardized College Entrance Exams like the SAT and ACT are used by some (not all) colleges as part of the application evaluation and for some (not all) scholarship evaluation. All schools consider GPA in rigorous curriculum to be of greater importance than test scores. There are also many wonderful schools that are entirely test-optional or test-blind (either not requiring or not even accepting test scores).

In our role as a college preparatory school, we have chosen to prepare students for the SAT to ensure that they have a variety of options when determining their best fit colleges. In preparation for the SAT, 9th – 11th grade students take the PSAT in the Fall and 11th grade students take the SAT in the Spring. For various reasons, students may also elect to independently register to retake the SAT or take the ACT to improve their scores before college applications are due in the winter of their senior year.

The PSAT was designed to provide an opportunity for practice, so that students could identify areas needing improvement prior to taking the SAT in their junior year. Reasons for administering the PSAT to the freshmen and sophomores include:

1. Increased exposure to PSAT practice reduces the anxiety students feel when it comes time to take the SAT in their junior year.
2. Each test generates specific feedback which the student can use to maximize opportunities for growth.
3. Each test can be linked to the Khan Academy to secure free, individualized practice on the skills most immediately beneficial to the student.
4. Analysis of the aggregate data provides opportunities for our school and network to look for best practices, strategies, and opportunities to improve our curriculum.

It is very important to understand that the first two years of PSAT testing really are intended to be diagnostic. Much of the material presented on the PSAT will not be taught until the end of sophomore or beginning of their junior year. Therefore, we suggest that concentrated test prep wait until the end of sophomore year, particularly for students who are focused on National Merit Scholarship Awards.

Test preparation for students

There are many independent, for-profit companies that offer “Test-Prep”. These courses can be beneficial in helping students prepare for the SAT. When it comes to test preparation, there is no magic solution, hint, or short-cut that is offered by these companies. They are merely an outside resource that can be used to focus on structuring exam practice for students.

For those students that are interested, the Office of College Counseling encourages the utilization of Khan Academy and CollegeBoard for their free resources and individualized practice.

The NMSQT is the National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test.

National Merit Scholarship Corporation wanted a way to identify students whom they could invest in. They wanted to financially reward students demonstrating proficiency and aptitude for future college success. They paired with CollegeBoard to utilize the PSAT scores in the fall of junior year. This timeframe allows them enough time to analyze national test scores, select the top 50,000 or so students across the nation, and commend their academic achievement and preparation for the test. They then begin a process of further review to select a subset of these students for additional recognition as Semi-Finalists and Finalists. Each subsequent level provides greater distinction in the college application process and is linked to additional scholarship opportunities. You can learn about the National Merit Scholarship Corporation at www.nationalmerit.org.