

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

February 23, 2016

Get Schooled

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Should your high school student take the ACT or the new SAT? An expert offers his view.

With twins in 11th grade, I am in the throes of the ACT vs. SAT discussion.

Along with many high school juniors across the state, my twins took the PSAT in October. They also took the ACT in November. Based on their scores, they seem a better fit for the SAT. So, they'll take the new SAT in June. Their school counselor recommends taking the ACT again as well, but they're undecided.

Eric Greenberg is a college advising, test preparation and tutoring expert. His [Greenberg Educational Group](#) provides admission and application advising (high school, college and graduate school), test preparation and academic tutoring worldwide. I asked him to write an op-ed on how students can figure out whether to take the ACT or the revised SAT that makes its debut next month.

By Eric Greenberg

With college admissions at competitive universities more challenging than ever, it is no wonder students and parents are asking which test to take, the SAT or the ACT. To make matters even more complicated, the College Board is introducing a radically redesigned SAT this March – marking the test’s first major overhaul since 2005.

So what can students expect from the new test? For one, the scoring will revert back to two 200-800 scores, with no penalty for wrong multiple choice answers. The essay will become optional, much like the ACT.

Studying large numbers of vocabulary words has for many years been an integral component of the SAT prep process. Students can rest assured the new format will no longer test such vocabulary. The test will instead focus less on memorization and more on interpretation than the prior format.

Meanwhile, the reading portion of the test will become more evidence based, meaning students will be asked questions that test whether they understand not only content, but how arguments are constructed and how persuasive the arguments are.



The math portion will also see changes, as it becomes more practical, dealing with more real-life situations, such as conversions regarding distances and profit & loss. A calculator can only be used for some of the math questions.

The new SAT format (compared to the prior format) will in many ways more closely resemble the ACT test, as it becomes more consistent with high school classroom work. The ACT is staying substantially constant this year, maintaining its four multiple choice sections: English, Math, Reading and Science, with an optional essay.

Prior to choosing between the two tests, students should be made aware that the vast majority of United States colleges that require either the SAT or ACT do not have a preference, from an admissions point of view, as to which test a student should take. Therefore, students should take the test in which they will likely perform higher.

So, how does a student know this? One way a student can make an informed choice is by taking a practice test of each type of exam to determine his or her strengths and weaknesses in order to decide which actual test to take. Overall, the new SAT will focus a bit more on reading skills, while the ACT tends to focus a bit more on math and science.

It is important to understand that preparing for the SAT or ACT is a long-term process that incorporates the bank of knowledge learned in the classroom, as well as outside of the classroom. Taking a wide variety of literature, history, math and science courses can, for example, be very helpful. In addition, reading a wide variety of books and famous speeches outside of class can give students an opportunity to experience many different writing styles from many different countries and eras.

Math can also be strengthened outside of class. For example, parents can take the time to discuss ratios, percentages and restaurant tipping amounts on an everyday basis. Integrating the learning process naturally tends to work very well.

Many colleges do not require the SAT nor the ACT, and many do. Among the colleges that do require the SAT or ACT, the relative emphasis they put on the scores for admissions purposes varies greatly.

Since many students apply to a significant number of schools, their SAT or ACT scores can range from not counting at all for a particular college, to counting for a high percentage of the admissions process.

There are many ways to prepare for the SAT or ACT. Some possibilities include: individual test prep, class test prep, school test prep classes, test prep study guides, online resources etc. The College Board, which writes the SAT, has practice problems and resources on its [website](#). The ACT has practice problems and resources on its [website](#). Test preparation requires consistent and regular focus and practice. Starting early is key so enough time can be allocated to the process. With all of the time demands on high school students, it can be difficult to juggle everything. That is why having a balanced plan is essential.

As we like to say: Start early and start smart