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Should Current Sophomores Take the October PSAT?

By Elizabeth LaScala, PhD

In March, the College Board, the organization that administers the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), announced plans to redesign the exam. The first full length practice tests will be released in spring 2015 and the new SAT will be available to our students in March 2016. According to College Board officials presenting at the Sept. 23 College Board Counselor Conference, the new SAT emphasizes vocabulary deemed more relevant to college level coursework, focuses on an increased breadth of math fundamentals, including precalculus, and includes an optional 50 minute analytical writing section that requires direct evidence and argument. I imagine that more selective colleges may prefer to see the writing section in order to more fully evaluate applicants.

The Khan Academy in collaboration with College Board is creating in-depth practice problems and instructional videos (see <https://www.khanacademy.org/sat>). These will be available at no charge in spring 2015 – a year before the launch of the redesigned exam. Each student will be able to practice at her own pace using Khan's personalized training which advances the student from one level to the next as she progresses toward her score goal.

Should current sophomores take the current version of the PSAT in October even though the SAT is going to change? This is the question many families are asking as we approach the October test date. My objective in this article is to offer families an understanding of the alternatives available so they can make more informed decisions. The Class of 2017 will have three options:

Option 1: Sophomores still have four chances to take the current SAT in October, November and December of 2015, as well as January 2016. Option 1 gives the student the opportunity to avoid the stress of taking a newly designed test the first season it is administered, achieving their score goal early in junior year and moving on. Taking this option, I suggest current sophomores ignore the PSAT; the results of the PSAT are not available until mid-December and a lot of learning takes place in the first months of the year; we all know that quick feedback on any exam is most useful to learning. Sophomores should aim to do as well as they can in 10th grade coursework and take a full length (current version) SAT practice exam in June 2015. Exams that have been administered are easy to access (see <http://sat.collegeboard.org/practice/official-sat-study-guide>). At the end of sophomore year, students will be more prepared to take the exam and thus can place greater confidence in the results. If they feel good about the test and their scores, they can prep for and take the current SAT on one or more of three test dates in the fall of 2015, or even in January 2016. These students may well be done with testing just as the second semester of the busy junior year unfolds. Students who have not achieved their score goal by January 2016 will have to decide if it is best to accept these scores, or prepare for and take the new SAT. If they decide to take the new SAT, they will have the summer following their junior year and fall of their senior year to prepare. Many students do that now successfully and it is not unusual. In addition, they will be able to access the free Khan Academy materials to help achieve their goals. Certainly there will also be ample opportunities to participate in the numerous fee-based SAT prep seminars and private tutoring that are offered in abundance in our region.

Option 2: Ignore the PSAT this October, take the redesigned PSAT in October 2015 as a practice test for the new SAT and prepare for and take the exam, which will be administered for the first time in March 2016. The pros of this option are that students are older, more mature and have more coursework completed, including any summer academic enrichment they may have pursued. The cons are that colleges have never seen, much less used, the new scores in admission decisions and we don't know how they will view them to evaluate applicants. Another downside is the reliance on the test prep industry to competently develop new prep materials and train their tutors to guide our students. I am not certain I would want my student to be the 'guinea pig' during a test transition cycle.

Option 3: Take the ACT. The ACT is the other standardized test that colleges accept when students apply. Either the ACT or the SAT meets the admission requirement and last cycle, for the first time in history, more students chose to take the ACT. The ACT is not expected to change significantly from its present form. Students who can read quickly and remember the details of what they read tend to do better on the exam. The easy way to tell if this is the right test for your student is to have her take practice reading and science sections of the ACT to see if she can finish on time without making careless errors.

(You can diagnose a careless error by having her retry the missed questions, untimed, and then have her indicate which ones she feels she "should have gotten right.") Practice tests can be found in The Real ACT Prep Guide (see <http://www.amazon.com/The-Real-Edi-tion-Prep-Guide/dp/0768934400>).

Given these three options, sophomores can safely ignore the PSAT this October as well as any other testing being offered. For a stronger read on testing, sophomores should take a full length SAT practice exam in summer 2015. To discern if the ACT is right for them, they should follow the guidelines for the ACT suggested above right around the same time. Armed with both test results, they can make a more informed decision.

A final note: Is there a reliable way for sophomores to know if the redesigned SAT or the ACT is better for them? My position is that it is too soon to discern significant differences – too early because there is insufficient information about the new SAT to formulate valid sets of questions, too early for our students to have mastered the necessary academic material, and definitely too early to put our students into a competitive standardized testing mindset. Our children, especially younger, more vulnerable 10th graders, are already under too much stress and this approach creates more. The best preparation for any standardized test (current SAT, new SAT or the ACT) is to develop a solid academic foundation in high school. Good students tend to perform well on any exam. Reading a good book or sleeping in on a Saturday morning beats taking another standardized test any day!

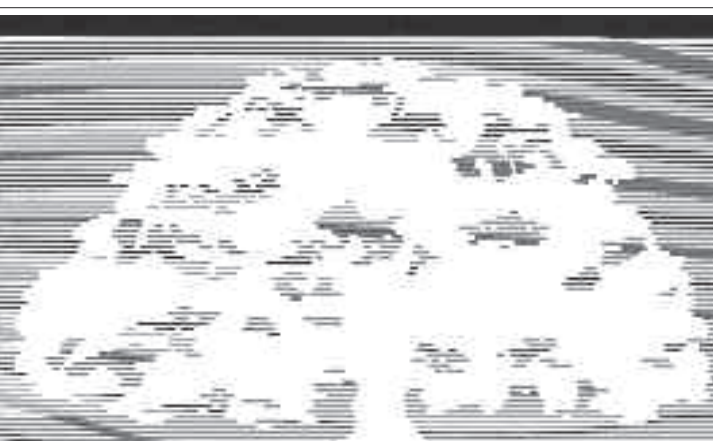


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National Merit Scholarship Semifinalists Announced

Submitted by Matthew Budreau

Officials of the National Merit Scholarship Corporation recently announced the names of approximately 16,000 semifinalists in the 60th annual National Merit Scholarship Program. These academically talented high school seniors have an opportunity to continue in the competition for some 7,600 National Merit Scholarships worth about \$33 million that will be offered next spring. To be considered for a Merit Scholarship award, semifinalists must fulfill several requirements to advance to the finalist level of the competition. About 90 percent of the semifinalists are expected to attain finalist standing, according to NMSC, and more than half of the finalists will win a National Merit Scholarship, earning the Merit Scholar title. The semifinalists named at the three Lamorinda high schools were as follows:

Acalanes High School

Lauren C. Kim, Christopher M. Mickas, Conor Sasner, and Eric W. Sirott

Campolindo High School

Nadia Aquil, Kourosh Arasteh, Katherine M. Coates, Stephen W. DaRodda, Yifan Hong, Brigid F. Leach, Sarah K. Sweeney, Andrew Z. Wang, Douglas M. Zhang, and Bradley J. Zhu

Miramonte High School

Emmanuelle L. Calinescu, Elliott R. Fong, Max Han, Brian W. Hauffer, Alexander M. Jang, Taoran E. Liu, Sarah J. Rookwood, Stephanie M. Sloves, and Benjamin H. Warren