

“Over prepping” and “early prepping” for the PSAT/SAT:

Why does this do more harm than good?

In our last feature, we focused on the recent change to the College Board SAT Reasoning Test and SAT Subject Test score reporting policy, one in which students will have the option to choose to send one set of scores from a single test date, or all of their SAT scores if they choose not to use the new score reporting option. College Board states that this change will be implemented to “reduce student stress and improve the test-day experience.” College Board also states “This new policy will give students the freedom to send the scores by the sitting (test date) that they feel best represents their ability...” However, we stated that there are other possible reasons for College Board’s change in policy; one reason in particular is that it may also allow for students to feel they have the option to take the SAT more often, and thus pay more test fees to College Board.

Another related concerning effect of this new policy is that it will lead to earlier and excessive preparation for the PSAT and SAT tests. This “early prep” trend refers to the increased number of students who begin preparing for the PSAT and SAT as soon as they enter secondary school (or even earlier) and then continue taking prep courses for the remainder of their pre-university school years. “Over prep” refers to the increased number of those who take two or more test preparation courses with different tutors and test preparation centers (sometimes simultaneously) or repeat the same course with the same test prep provider three or more times.

Those who do early prep do so for a number of reasons; one common reason is to maximize their PSAT/SAT scores to meet the requirements and gain acceptance to a summer school program sponsored by a prestigious US university. A great majority of these students believe that attending these summer programs at, say, Harvard or Johns Hopkins will give them an advantage if they apply to that same school later on for undergraduate admission. This view is false. ***Attending a summer school program at a university does not boost your chances of getting into that same school.*** Universities view their summer school programs as opportunities for secondary school students to not only gain lifelong experiences but also to become interested enough in their schools to apply later, thus boosting their application numbers and increase their rankings in publications such as US News and World Report.

Another misconception is that preparing early for the tests will result in higher scores with each subsequent test sitting. The PSAT and SAT are reasoning tests, and are specially made such that students will fall for the same traps each time and score relatively the same no matter how many times they take the test. Any test prep provider worth its salt will teach techniques that show you how to avoid the pitfalls, thereby boosting your score. However, the PSAT and SAT assumes that you have studied mathematics up to and including advanced Algebra according to the US secondary education system (typically completed by the end of one’s third year), while the SAT Subject Test assumes knowledge up to the Pre-calculus level. Those who start too early end up with the burden of trying to learn not only the test taking techniques, but also of cramming one or two years worth of high school math concepts into one two-month test prep course program. This will result in undue frustration, loss of confidence and stress.

In extreme cases, some students have admitted to us that they have enrolled at two or more schools at the same time. Needless to say, this is a severe waste of the students’ time, as these students will receive conflicting information that will prove overwhelming and confusing, and negatively impact their scores come test time. It’s best that students consult their school advisors or get references from their peers before deciding on a test prep provider. If that test prep provider is of sufficient quality, the student puts forth the effort during the course, and if the student takes the PSAT or SAT immediately after the program ends, they should be able to achieve their best test score, and, satisfied, move on to focusing their time and resources on schoolwork and extracurricular activities.

If you are interested in finding out more about the SAT standardized tests and the American university application system, or are interested in conducting a custom-made SAT preparation program at your school, please contact Testtakers Singapore by calling +65.6728.7476, or via email at