

College Beat

The First Test

High school juniors (and some sophomores) across the nation filed into schools at 7:30 am on a Saturday morning this past week – an unnatural act for the teenage set. The reason was the PSAT exam. Some schools offered the test on Wednesday of that same week, but it is the only time of the year that the PSAT is administered. It serves as a milestone for the college bound students as it kicks off a series of events in the college planning process. It is the catalyst for getting the wheels turning in minds of students and parents alike as they begin to enter the exploration of colleges and provides them with information about test prep in the future and some guidelines as to which colleges are reasonable prospects.

The “P” in the PSAT acronym stands for preliminary. It is a practice test for the college entrance exam known solely as the SAT now – it is a test of reasoning skills and has since dropped the name Scholastic Aptitude Test that the acronym originated from. The idea behind the PSAT is fourfold. One, the student gets an opportunity to get practice taking the SAT when the stakes are low. No colleges will ever see the PSAT scores. Two, the score report the student receives after taking the exam can serve as a study guide for the actual SAT exam. Three, the scores the student receives can be used as a benchmark for future performance as a way to assess the viability of prospective colleges. And four, the PSAT is co-sponsored by the National Merit Scholarship Corporation to be used as a qualifier for its honors and scholarships (for juniors only).

In December families will receive PSAT score reports from the College Board which will contain valuable information. It will give the student a numerical score for each of the three sections of the exam. The sections are Critical Reading, Math and Writing. These are the same as the SAT exam with the exception of the writing section - in the PSAT there is no essay required in the writing section. These scores will be on a scale of 10 to 80 and to extrapolate out to your student’s anticipated SAT score simply add a zero to the end of the number. The report will also give the student a percentile score which compares the student’s numerical score to other students only in that student’s grade. Also on the report is a listing of all the types of problems included on the test by subject and which questions the student answered correctly and incorrectly. This becomes a perfect study guide from which to prepare for the SAT since you can readily see the areas of weakness.

Most importantly, the PSAT score report gives the family their first benchmark to use in the college search process. With a ball-park range of what one might expect for an SAT score it is possible to start in earnest the dialogue about what schools might be of serious

interest to a student. Granted, the standardized tests are only one piece of the academic puzzle in college admissions – but, it can and should break the ice for some important conversations within a family for college planning purposes.

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