

# Teaching the Test

*High schoolers turn to tutors to boost their all-important ACT and SAT scores*

**FOR HIGH SCHOOL UPPERCLASSMEN AND THEIR PARENTS**, the months ahead will likely be consumed by one critical topic — college choice.

Lots of factors — cost, field of study, size of the school, location — will receive consideration. But when the entire process shakes out, the only students who will find themselves heading off to a college at or near the top of their wish list will be the ones with the test scores needed to qualify for admission.

Good grades are still important, but classroom success doesn't always translate to high scores on standardized tests. All of which is why even excellent students are turning to learning centers to help get them ready for those crucial ACT and SAT exams. In Illinois, more emphasis is put on the ACT because it is the exam the state's schools rely on, as do many Midwest colleges.

"The amount of students applying to colleges continues to grow, which is creating more and more competition for students trying to be accepted," says James Corngold, regional director for Sylvan Learning Center in St. Charles and South Elgin. "We've seen a steady increase in business over the last several years. The students and their parents are looking for any advantage they can get."

David Lilek of LaGrange Park is one such parent. His daughter, Grace, is an A-minus student, but Lilek knew taking standardized tests was never her forte. He enrolled Grace in a test preparation program offered by Huntington Learning Center in hope of earning her an edge.

"It's just incredible how competitive the whole (college admission) process is," Lilek says. "A school may be able to only accept 3,000 kids, but have 20,000 applications. The schools will tell you what range of test scores you need to be considered and I just wanted to be sure we'd have a good fit for Grace."



Photo by Ed Ahern

Huntington Learning Center's Garry Fairfield works with a student on ACT test prep materials.

Grace started by taking a diagnostic ACT exam in the fall and then began attending classes at Huntington twice a week for a couple of hours until taking the real thing in April. The result was an increase of "five or six points" in her overall score, which puts the senior right where she needs to be among the colleges she is considering.

"What I really liked about Huntington was the way the teachers worked one-on-one with the students," David Lilek says. "The work was also something Grace was able to consider more like homework. Some other programs are more high pressure or longer in term."

Garry Fairfield, regional director for Huntington's LaGrange Park and Downers Grove centers, says exam preparation is tailored to each individual after the diagnostic test results are evaluated. Teaching test-taking skills and administering practice exams are included in every program, but how much tutoring time is spent on specific subjects is based on need.

"We sit down with the student and the parents to make recommendations," Fairfield says. "Some students come in to take



## The SAT and ACT Aren't the Only Tests That Can Help Prospective Students Get in the Right College

**WHILE ACT OR SAT TESTS** are instrumental in helping college admissions officers understand the capabilities of prospective students, there's another kind of test that can help students better understand their own academic and career potential

It's called the Ball Aptitude Battery, developed by the locally-based Ball Foundation and offered through Career

Vision in Glen Ellyn. The test provides objective information on a student's potential to learn the skills required for specific tasks related to certain jobs. This can help students in selecting majors suited to their skills and the appropriate colleges at which to pursue them.

Investing up front in aptitude testing and career planning can save money in the long run. Almost one third of students

now take five years or more to complete college, often due to career uncertainty that leads to switching majors or transferring schools. Each extra year of college can cost upwards of \$30,000, not to mention the tens of thousands in foregone income that could have been earned working.

For more information on the Ball Aptitude Battery, call Career Vision at 630 469-6270 or go to [www.careervision.org](http://www.careervision.org).

the diagnostic test and find out they are doing just fine. Another might just need some help in math or English. On the other hand, if a student scores a 17 on the diagnostic test and hopes to raise it to a 34, that requires having an honest conversation with the parents and setting realistic expectations.”

Fairfield says his clients typically average a three- to five-point improvement in their overall ACT score. It may sound like a little, but the increase can really mean a lot.

“That could be the difference between getting a scholarship or not,” he says. “I had one student last semester who raised her score from 32 to 34 and her parents couldn’t be happier because it opened up significant scholarship opportunities for her.”

Brooke Biddle of St. Charles can relate. She knew her ACT score had to be at least 28 in order to qualify for an academic scholarship at the schools she was targeting. She took a diagnostic exam at Sylvan and scored 24. After five months in Sylvan’s exam preparation program her score shot up to 30.

“It helped a ton,” Biddle says. “I’m not always the quickest reader and people can lose a lot of points if they can’t finish an entire section. You learn techniques on how to get through the questions quicker and also narrowing the choices for the possible answer.”

## OTHER TEST PREP OPTIONS

**NATIONALLY, TWO OF THE BIG NAMES** in college test preparation are the Princeton Review and Kaplan, both of which offer private tutoring, a limited number of traditional test prep classes at locations across the western suburbs, as well as on-line courses.

For information on Princeton Review programs, call 800 273-8439 or go to [www.princetonreview.com](http://www.princetonreview.com). For Kaplan, call 800 527-8378 or go to [www.kaptest.com](http://www.kaptest.com).

Biddle spent about five months in the Sylvan program, going twice a week for two hours each night. Then she had to do the required homework.

“There was a lot stress, but you just have to be committed to doing the work. The homework is a huge part of the preparation,” Biddle says.

Sylvan’s Corngold echoes that sentiment. “The typical gain we see in ACT scores is three to four points, but the caveat to that is students have to do all the work,” he says. “This is not a passive class. The students have to be active participants.”

The costs and time commitment associated with exam preparation courses varies. Sylvan offers small group classes that meet for 26 hours over seven weeks. The cost ranges from \$800 to \$900. Customized instruction costs \$47 per hour and typically averages 25 to 30 hours.

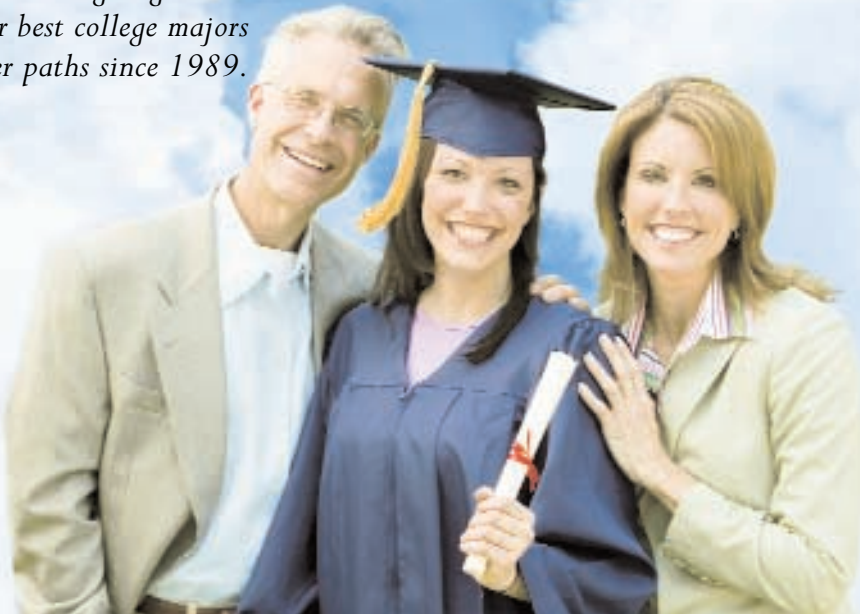
Huntington charges \$55 to \$70 per hour for individual instruction. Fairfield has had students take as few as 15 hours to as many as 65. “It really depends on what the student wants to get done,” he says. “Then the family makes the decision on what is doable.” — *Greg Canfield*

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## Is Your Student Ready?

- 30% of students leave college after their first year
- Almost 50% of college students never graduate
- Over 50% of Americans are dissatisfied with their jobs

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### *A Parent’s Story*

“As a businessman, I know the value of direction and goals. I continually speak with clients that have high school or college-aged students who ‘don’t know what they want to be when they grow up’.”

“Having a confident, directed college student can save parents thousands of dollars from the ‘exploring college majors syndrome,’ to which so many students fall prey. Career Vision helps students navigate the confusing maze of choosing a college and major that will ultimately support the best career fit.”

Larry Tarman,  
Hinsdale Central H.S. and Indiana University Parent  
President/CEO, Next Level Results Group

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Call 630.469.6270 to learn more or go to [www.careervision.org](http://www.careervision.org)