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# **ACT Success:** Good Grades, Not Test Practice

## You don't like disrupting your lessons for test preparation. And you find it as dull as your students do. But you face tremendous pressure to improve your school's test scores. And you want your students to do well on the ACT so they have a good shot at college and scholarships.

You may have put your lesson plans on hold, convinced that months of practicing test questions will boost scores. But guess what? It doesn't help. In fact, sometimes it hurts. ACT scores are actually lower in schools where teachers spend large amounts of class time on test prep.

**So what works? Good grades. Demanding instruction. An environment focused on preparing students for college.**

Sounds obvious, right? But many teachers and students don't see the connection between ACT scores and classwork. In surveys, more than 80 percent of eleventh-graders and nearly 60 percent of their teachers said ACT scores are primarily determined by test-taking skills. But the ACT is not a test that can be gamed, despite the claims you've heard from test prep marketers. Colleges rely on this test because it tells them who has the higher-order analytical and problem-solving skills needed to succeed in college classes. Those skills can't be crammed into a few months—they take years of hard work and challenging class assignments.

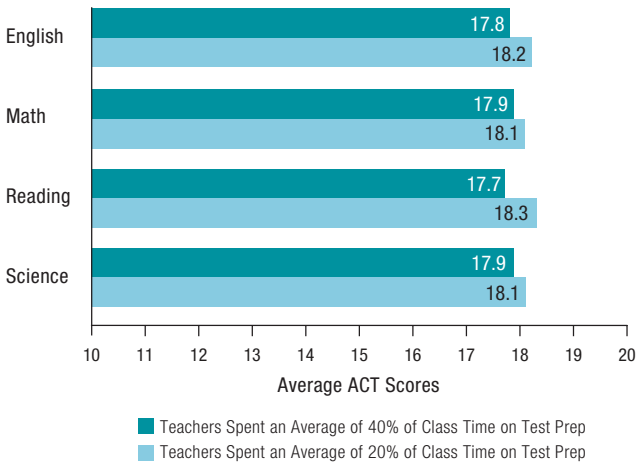
Researchers at the University of Chicago—the Consortium on Chicago School Research—have spent years trying to understand what it takes to get Chicago students ready for college. We wanted to know why students' ACT scores are so low, even though they are so motivated to do well.

## This is what we discovered:

- Students made smaller gains from the PLAN to the ACT the more their teachers spent class time on test practice and used materials from test-prep companies (when we compare schools with similar students and teacher experience).
- Students' coursework affects their ACT score. Regardless of whether students start with high or low test scores, those who earn As and Bs in their classes make big gains in a short period of time. Juniors who barely pass with Cs and Ds either make no progress in their scores moving from the PLAN to ACT, or fall behind.

Figure 1

ACT scores were slightly lower in schools where teachers spent large amounts of class time on test preparation



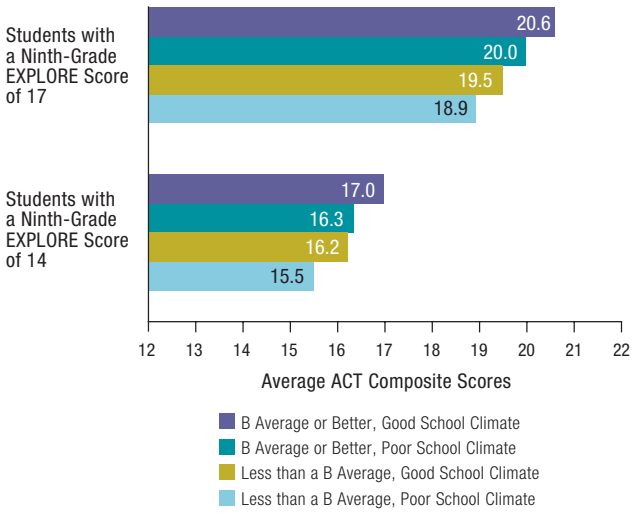
## What else matters for ACT scores?

- ACT scores are highest in schools that emphasize preparation for college, even when comparing schools that serve similar students.
- Scores are also highest in schools where students regularly attend class, do homework, bring supplies and pay attention, when we compare schools that serve similar students.
- The ACT emphasizes skills needed for college over subject area content. The teacher guides list many different topics that could be on the exam, but it is more important to develop problem- solving skills around a few topics than to try to cover many topics shallowly.
- Students benefit from taking at least one full-length, timed practice ACT test so they become familiar with the content and pacing of the exam.
- Certain instructional practices also are linked to higher ACT scores (See list below).

Figure 2

Students' effort in their course and school practice matter for ACT scores

*ACT Scores by Students' Cumulative GPA and School Climate*




## Here's how you can help…

✔ **Channel your students' motivation into their coursework.** Even students with mediocre grades and classroom behavior are highly motivated to do well on the ACT. You need to make it clear that higher grades and more effort will help them do better on this high-stakes test.

✔ **Focus your instruction on higher-order problem-solving skills.** Doing well on the ACT requires students to be able to interpret complex reading, analyze data, pay attention to details and write well.

✔ **Don't abandon valuable lessons for test prep.** Instead, focus on quality classroom practices that are connected to higher ACT scores.

✔ **One of the most effective practices is to have students frequently write papers defending their point of view.** Effective subject-specific practices include doing the following on a regular basis (see next column):

**ENGLISH CLASS** (for reading and English subtest):

- Ask your students to improve a piece of writing as a class or with partners.
- Have your students explain how writers use tools like symbolism.
- Students should discuss how culture, time or place affects an author's writing.
- Get students to debate the meaning of their readings.
- Have students rewrite papers or essays in response to comments. Don't fix it for them.

**MATH CLASS:**

- Have students discuss different solutions to problems with each other.
- Use graphing calculators.

**SCIENCE CLASS:**

- Make students use evidence/data to support arguments or hypotheses.
- Have students generate their own hypotheses.
- Offer students many opportunities to interpret information from graphs and tables.
- Ask students to write lab reports.