

ACT Test Prep – More is not Better

Most students in Chicago Public Schools set high expectations for themselves when it comes to the ACT. And most teachers want their students to succeed. Given the motivation and the large stakes regarding the test, test prep strategies are sometimes substituted for regular lessons in many classrooms, in an attempt to make students as prepared as possible. However, research at UChicago CCSR found that **spending class time on test prep does not make students more prepared for the ACT.**

In fact, it is less effective than most regular teaching practices. The ACT was designed to challenge students' higher-level reasoning skills. In-class test prep takes time away from developing those abilities needed to get better scores. Instead, **a challenging academic atmosphere and a class curriculum that teaches critical thinking gives students the best shot at succeeding on the ACT.** Consider the stats:

TEST PREP HAS LITTLE IMPACT ON ACT SCORES

ACT scores were either indistinguishable, or in some cases *lower*, in schools where most teachers engaged in intensive test prep activities in class (such as reviewing practice problems and test strategies) compared to schools where most teachers did not, comparing students with similar scores in schools that serve similar students.



Note: Intensive preparation refers to doing the test preparation activity once a week or more in the spring term. The difference between schools where "Most Teachers" versus "Few Teachers" do intensive prep is 50 percentage points (e.g., 60% compared to 10% of teachers), which is about two standard deviations across schools. The difference was calculated through statistical models measuring the change in average scores for every percentage point increase in the number of teachers doing intensive preparation. These differences control for students' PLAN score, backgrounds, teacher and school characteristics, as described in the Appendix D. *p<.05 **p<.01

Spending class time on test prep does not help students' scores because:

- It takes away time from developing the analytic skills needed on the ACT that come from regular instruction.
- It can give a false sense of the timing of the test.
- Practice tests are not designed for learning; their design makes them confusing as instructional tools.

On the flip side...

ENGAGING CLASSROOM TEACHING BOOSTS ACT SCORES

Students with teachers that challenged them to think critically, defend viewpoints, and construct arguments fared better on the ACT than students who started out with the same PLAN scores, but who spent less time on challenging tasks in their eleventh grade classes. These instructional practices showed significant positive relationships with higher ACT scores:

English Scores

- Improved a piece of writing in partners or as a class
- Explained how writers use tools such as symbolism

Math Scores

- Discussed different solutions to problems with each other
- Used graphing calculators to complete an assignment

Reading Scores

- Discussed how culture, time or place affects an author's writing
- Debated the meaning of a reading

Science Scores

- Used evidence/data to support arguments or hypotheses
- Generated their own hypothesis

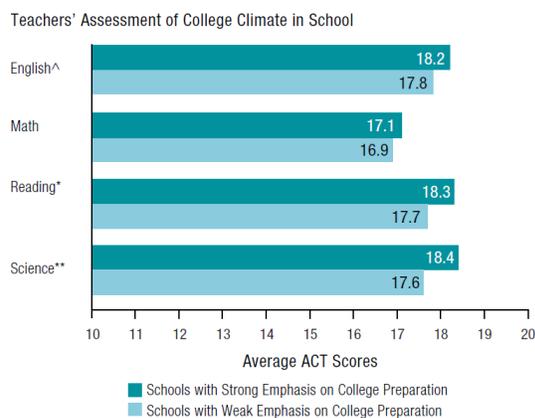
Overall Scores

- Wrote at least 5 papers across all classes defending a point of view

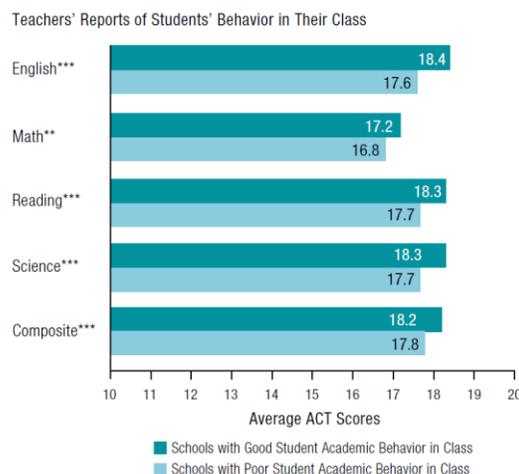
GOOD SCHOOL ATMOSPHERE HELPS ACT SCORES

Schools where students were attentive in classrooms and academically focused did better on the ACT, than students with similar prior scores on the PLAN in schools that were less college-focused or had poor student behavior.

ACT scores were higher in schools where teachers reported a strong emphasis on college preparation:



ACT scores were higher in schools where teachers reported good student behavior during class:



Note: These differences control for students' 11th Grade PLAN score, backgrounds, and teacher and school characteristics. Teachers' reports are taken from the 5 Essentials survey. [^] $p < .10$ ^{*} $p < .05$ ^{**} $p < .01$ ^{***} $p < .001$

Here's how you can help...

- ✓ *Channel students' motivation to do well on the ACT into their coursework.*

We found through surveys that even students with mediocre grades and classroom behavior are highly motivated for the ACT. It can help if students recognize that focusing on classwork will help them to do better on the test, regardless of prior class performance.

- ✓ *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. This is much more important than broad content coverage. The ACT is not a test of subject-area content.

- ✓ *Don't abandon valuable lessons for test prep.*

Instead, focus on quality classroom practices that are connected to higher ACT scores.