



CollegeEd®

8

Parent's Guide to Testing and Academic Planning

Family
Handbook

The College Board: Connecting Students to College Success

The College Board is a not-for-profit membership association whose mission is to connect students to college success and opportunity. Founded in 1900, the association is composed of more than 5,000 schools, colleges, universities, and other educational organizations. Each year, the College Board serves seven million students and their parents, 23,000 high schools, and 3,500 colleges through major programs and services in college admissions, guidance, assessment, financial aid, enrollment, and teaching and learning. Among its best-known programs are the SAT®, the PSAT/NMSQT®, and the Advanced Placement Program® (AP®). The College Board is committed to the principles of excellence and equity, and that commitment is embodied in all of its programs, services, activities, and concerns.


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Parent's Guide to Testing and Academic Planning

The Future Starts Now

There's an old saying that states, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." This is perhaps never more significant than in eighth grade. Children at this age are on a precipice, about to take a leap into the school years that are likely to shape their academic and career lives. Moving into high school, children are faced with an increasing number of choices, and these choices have an increasing impact on their futures.

As the parent of an eighth-grader, you are in a position to support your child and help make the decisions that will offer the broadest range of choices and the most opportunities going forward. This guide is designed to give you some advice and background in order to do so.

What Is CollegeEd®?

During this school year, your child will participate in the CollegeEd® program, *Improving My Skills*. This program is designed to help children start thinking about their academic futures and take practical steps toward identifying their skills, challenges, and goals. The aim is to help your child make choices that will lead him or her to the right college and career path. With your support, your child will explore career choices and will learn what decisions and actions now will give him or her the most options for continuing his or her education after high school.

The term *college* is used in CollegeEd to mean any type of institution of higher learning. This includes two- and four-year colleges and universities as well as technical or vocational schools. Planning an educational path begins now, as your child makes important decisions about what classes to take over the next few years.

About the Course

The CollegeEd program provides a different curriculum for each grade level from 7 through 12. The eighth-grade course, *Improving My Skills*, focuses on building academic skills, improving study habits, developing test-taking ability, and setting goals for the future.

Throughout each year's different materials, one theme is constant: Education matters, and college is about you. Research has shown that one of the major determining factors in students' academic success is their attitude toward education—their confidence, their connection to their work, and their motivation and desire to do well. Even the smartest student can fail if he or she doesn't feel competent and eager to succeed. Therefore, one of the primary aims of this program is to help students gain that sense of connection to their education by demonstrating how what they do in school is linked to everyday life, and how college is not just an expectation but a tool they can use to get where they want to be in life.

The CollegeEd program addresses all students from all kinds of families and from all economic backgrounds. It addresses students who are already thinking about going to college, and it addresses students who may be thinking that college is not an option for them. The program also recognizes that parents may have as many questions as students have. That's why we try to address your questions with this family handbook at each grade level. For more information about preparing for, applying to, and paying for college, visit www.collegeboard.com.

CollegeEd Assistants

Your child may ask you to serve as a CollegeEd assistant over the course of the year. The CollegeEd assistant is someone the child chooses to serve as a mentor and helper throughout the course (though not all schools will integrate this role into their implementation of the CollegeEd program). This person is a vital member of the CollegeEd team—the group of individuals who makes the program a success for each student. As a CollegeEd assistant, you would be expected to work closely with your child, facilitate the work he or she does for this course, participate in projects and/or events, and stay involved with the school staff running the program as necessary.

Eighth-Grade Choices That Matter

In order to help your child do the right things during this school year, it's important for you to be aware of the particular choices your child will have to make that can have an impact on his or her future. Below are a few things you should be aware of.

Course Taking for College Readiness

It is a little-known fact that high school graduation requirements are not always the same as college entrance requirements. What this means is that even if your child is taking everything he or she needs to work through high school courses as mandated by your district, he or she may still graduate without the courses necessary to get into college. One important factor as to whether students will be successful is whether they take algebra in the eighth grade. Be sure to meet with the school counselor at your school and discuss your child's current course schedule. Work with the counselor to problem solve in the event that your child is not on a college-ready path.

High School Choices

Depending on the size and nature of your district, your child may face a decision this year about which high school to attend for ninth grade and beyond. This can be a critical decision, and in some areas a difficult and overwhelming one. It's important that you work with your child to research the options available, consider the different factors involved, and complete whatever paperwork is necessary. Here are some things you may want to think about:

- **Transportation.** It's important to select a school to which your child can easily and promptly commute.
- **School environment.** Visit possible schools to determine whether this is the sort of environment you want for your child, and whether it is one in which he or she is comfortable.
- **Matriculation rates.** You might want to determine what percentage of the school's graduating class goes to college. This will give you an idea of whether the school is working toward the goals you have for your child.
- **Course offerings.** In order for your child to graduate prepared for college work, it's important that the high school he or she attends offers rigorous course work. Talk to the school counselor about what AP® or IB classes are available at the school.
- **Extracurricular offerings.** A school that offers a broad range of extracurricular activities will help children broaden their experience and identify their skills and interests. Children may also have particular activities in which they know they want to participate, and you should look for these in the schools you consider.
- **High school specializations.** Some large districts have high schools that focus on certain areas, such as law and public service, health care, or environmental studies. If you are in such a district, research what specializations are available and discuss with your child where his or her interests lie and why. Remember, the specialization alone may not be enough reason to select that school. It should also have a balance of the other factors you are looking for.

Working Toward College

In today's world, it is increasingly difficult to build a comfortable life without some level of higher education. In fact, annual income is in most cases directly correlated with education level. The good news is that a college education has never been more accessible. There are college solutions for people of all interests and backgrounds. All it takes is the desire and preparation to make it happen. That's what CollegeEd is all about: cultivating the desire and facilitating the preparation.

In order to begin working toward higher education, there are some things that your child needs to be working on, in eighth grade and throughout high school:

- **Habit building.** Part of the reason CollegeEd focuses on building academic skills in the eighth-grade edition is that this year is crucial for setting long-term work and study habits that will affect students' success in high school and beyond. Without these habits in place, those students who do ultimately graduate from high school and attend a college or university will likely struggle once they get there. Skills such as time management, note-taking, decision making, and prioritizing are essential for college success.
- **Setting goals.** Goal setting and awareness are key aspects of student success and educational attainment. Young people need a motivating force to help them see the relevance and personal value of the work they are doing. Goal setting is an ongoing process; goals should be reassessed and reevaluated at least once a year. Talk with your child about his or her short- and long-term goals, and work together to achieve them.
- **Achievement.** One of the concepts addressed in the eighth-grade *Student Workbook* is the link between success and self-confidence. This is a key idea for parents of eighth-graders. Each time your child reaches beyond his or her comfort zone or achieves something new, this will build confidence. Encourage your child to try new things, and reinforce his or her successes. This sort of positive reinforcement will inspire and motivate your child to keep working hard toward his or her goals.

About Standardized Testing

Chances are that your child has already been exposed to some standardized tests, probably in the form of state achievement tests but perhaps others as well. From eighth grade through high school, standardized testing is going to play a large role in your child's life and in his or her future planning.

Types of Testing

College Admissions Tests

High school students take college admissions tests to give colleges a measure of their abilities. Today these tests are an important element in students' college applications because nearly all colleges require applicants to submit the scores of these tests. Many financial aid programs also require these scores, and high schools sometimes use scores as a factor in course placement, academic advising, and instructional planning.

The primary purpose of college admissions tests is to allow colleges to compare students from different high schools by using a single uniform assessment tool. When colleges evaluate student transcripts, the tests help them make fair comparisons among schools with different grading standards and levels of competitiveness.

High school students take college admissions tests for the first time in the spring of their junior year. They may repeat the tests at the end of their junior year and again at the beginning of their senior year. Students preregister for these tests, either online or by mail, up to two months ahead of time. The following are the most common college admissions tests:

SAT®

The College Board's SAT Reasoning Test™ is the most widely taken college admissions test. It assesses critical thinking and problem-solving skills that are important for academic success, according to the test's sponsor, the College Board. The test is given seven times a year on set dates at test centers throughout the United States and other countries. Nearly every college in the United States accepts the SAT® as its required college admissions test.

The SAT has sections on critical reading, mathematics, and writing.

- The critical reading section has sentence completions that require knowledge of vocabulary and logical reasoning. This section also has passages with vocabulary, comprehension, and analysis questions.
- The mathematics section has multiple-choice and open-ended algebra and plane geometry problems.
- The writing section asks students to recognize and correct flaws in usage, improve paragraphs, and write an essay on a specific topic.

ACT

Similarly, the ACT, a test owned by ACT, Inc., assesses a student's general educational development and the ability to handle college-level work. The test consists of four multiple-choice sections in English, mathematics, reading, and science. An optional writing section also asks students to plan and write a short essay.

- The 45-minute English section includes 75 questions that ask students to recognize and correct faults in written passages.
- The 60-minute mathematics section has 60 algebra and plane geometry questions with multiple-choice answers.
- The 35-minute reading section has 40 multiple-choice vocabulary and comprehension questions about a reading passage.
- The 35-minute science section has 40 multiple-choice questions based on data and reading passages.
- The optional 30-minute writing test gives a writing prompt for a student essay.

ACT tests are given at test centers throughout the United States and in other countries on specific dates. The majority of colleges accept ACT scores on students' applications.

SAT® & ACT: How can you help your child?

- Help your child plan the best college-preparatory course work possible.
- Encourage your child to read—and be a model reader yourself!
- Work on vocabulary improvement.
- Help your child develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
- Determine with your child the best form of test preparation.
- Help your child become familiar with the test through practice.
- Advise your child on effective test-taking strategies.
- Direct your child to Web sites for resources and practice materials.
- Make sure your child is registered in time; on test day, make sure he or she is well rested, well fed, prepared, and familiar with the test site.

College Admissions Practice Tests

The SAT and ACT offer shorter preliminary tests for several purposes: to practice test-taking skills, to qualify for scholarships, and to help assess skills necessary for college work. These are officially called the PSAT/NMSQT® (Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test) and PLAN.

PSAT/NMSQT®

The PSAT/NMSQT is a perfect opportunity for college-bound students to practice test-taking skills and compete for national scholarships. The highest scorers on the PSAT/NMSQT qualify to compete for scholarships offered through the National Merit Scholarship Corporation, a cosponsor of the exam, and they can also receive prestigious recognition as National Merit Scholars. Additional scholarship programs that can help students who take the PSAT/NMSQT are the National Hispanic Recognition Program, the National Scholarship Service (NSSFNS) for African American Students, and the Telluride Association scholarship program for summer seminars.

In conjunction with the PSAT/NMSQT, students also are able to access an online college and career planning feature called MyRoad™. After taking the test, students will begin to receive information from colleges.

However, for most students who take the PSAT/NMSQT, the main purpose is to gain authentic practice for the SAT. The test not only builds familiarity with the SAT but also contains a diagnostic element that provides skills feedback so students learn from their mistakes.

Students have the opportunity to take the PSAT/NMSQT at the end of their sophomore year and again, if they like, at the beginning of their junior year. The PSAT/NMSQT follows the same format as the SAT except that it is shorter. Instead of a total of 3 hours and 45 minutes, the test takes 2 hours and 10 minutes.

High school students who take the test also receive My College QuickStart™, an online personalized college planning kit based on their test results—with access until they graduate high school. Students can take the next steps toward college with these powerful features:

- An online score report, including projected SAT score ranges, state percentiles, and the power to sort answer explanations by difficulty and question type
- A customized SAT study plan, including a full-length SAT practice test
- Personalized lists of colleges, majors, and careers that may be researched using MyRoad

PLAN

PLAN, which is taken by fewer students than the PSAT/NMSQT, is the practice test for the ACT. As a component of the test, PLAN also offers an interest inventory to help students plan for future careers.

Like the ACT, it consists of four multiple-choice tests: English, reading, mathematics, and science. However, instead of a total of 175 minutes for the ACT, PLAN's four tests take only 115 minutes. Students may take this test as sophomores.

PSAT/NMSQT® & PLAN:

How can you best help your child?

- Emphasize the importance of schoolwork and reading.
- Make sure your child is registered on time.
- Alleviate stress by emphasizing that these are low-stakes tests.
- Help your child use the test as a learning experience.
- Review the results with your child to put the scores into context and to learn from incorrect answers.

AP® Exams

Unlike the previously described tests, Advanced Placement Program® (AP) Exams are not used in college admissions. These exams, which assess mastery of content in a specific subject area, are based on the content of the courses taught in the classroom. Students who have received high grades on the exam can earn college credit.

AP courses and exams have benefits beyond college credit, however. AP courses give capable students the opportunity to take college-level classes in high school and learn skills that lead to college success before college entrance. Additionally, there is no risk involved in taking an AP Exam because the student controls whether a school receives the exam scores.

Most colleges and universities in the United States and Canada, and institutions in more than 40 other countries, grant students credit, placement, or both for qualifying AP Exam grades, which can help students pursue more study options in college. For example, students can move into upper-level courses in their field of interest, pursue a double major or a joint B.A./M.A. program, or gain time to study or travel abroad.

AP®: How can you help your child?

- Ensure that your child takes college-preparatory course work leading up to AP courses.
- Help your child understand and meet the demands of an AP course—an AP course often requires more reading and other work outside of the classroom.

Exit Exams

By 2012, 72 percent of public high school students will have to pass a mandatory exit exam according to the Center on Education Policy. Twenty-five states already require their graduating seniors to pass such a competency exam before a high school diploma is granted. This trend results from the accountability movement in public schools today. Because of exit exams, states can reassure colleges and employers that a high school graduate from one of their public high schools has mastered basic academic skills.

The exit exam, usually taken well before graduation, also has been shown to help as an early identification of struggling students in order to provide resources, help raise schools' academic achievement, and even improve SAT scores. Because of multiple retest opportunities, 90 percent of high school students ultimately pass the exam, while 65 to 85 percent pass on the first opportunity.

It is important to find out what type of exit exam your child will be taking in your state because different exams require slightly different preparation. Your best resource for exit exams is the Web site for your state's department of education, which will detail contents of the exam, scoring, exam schedules, retesting stipulations, and graduation requirements. Many sites also provide test preparation, such as a test outline, previous sample questions or tests, student study guides, and reference sheets. This site is your best resource, along with your individual school and your child's teachers.

PSSS

CollegeEd: Improving My Skills is often offered in conjunction with another test program called the **PSSS**. The **PSSS**, or **Preliminary SAT Scoring Service**, is a College Board testing service, the goals of which are to assist efforts to increase college-going options and to inspire students to plan beyond secondary school. The PSSS is a previously administered PSAT/NMSQT, but PSSS results are not used by National Merit Scholarship Corporation or other scholarship programs. Like the PSAT/NMSQT, the PSSS provides comprehensive, personalized feedback on academic skills. The PSSS gives students:

- advance notice about the types of skills colleges seek—a great early awareness activity;
- an opportunity to compare their reasoning skills to those of sophomores preparing to go to college, which can motivate students to work on skills and improve their performance in critical reading, math, and writing;
- access to a test designed to prepare them for an important part of the application process—the SAT—by mirroring its format and providing question-by-question feedback;
- feedback on skills that need work and suggestions for how to improve them; and
- explanations for every test question to use for additional practice.

Preparing for Testing

Preparing for the testing process involves more than just attending to your child's intellectual experiences. Parents also need to be aware of the psychological issues involved with test taking to ease their child's journey through the testing process in many ways.

Foster Motivation

Help your child to see the value of testing by linking it to the entire college process. In this regard, taking your child on a college visit can suggest the appeal of college life. Then he or she may understand that testing and the college admissions process are things that must be done to reach his or her goals of independence, being on campus, and being surrounded by a stimulating group of peers. "If you put in a little effort now, there will be a big payoff" is a good message for a child to hear.

Provide Support

Parents can provide much-needed support and confidence building through the ups and downs of the testing process. Maintaining a positive, encouraging attitude helps to boost your child's self-assurance and belief in his or her ability to succeed. Allowing your child to take responsibility for as much test preparation as possible also shows your confidence in his or her abilities.

Stay on Top of Deadlines

Help your child stay informed about deadlines for test registration and preparation. Maintaining a family calendar of important dates can help to make sure that deadlines aren't missed. Throughout the test-taking process, your child can learn how to stay organized, plan ahead, manage time wisely, set goals, and meet deadlines.

Alleviate Stress

Coping with stress is a skill that you can help your child build. For one thing, you can explain that stress is not a bad thing. Compare the process to the stress experienced by performers who get nervous before a play or athletes who get nervous before a big game, so that your child sees that tension can focus his or her energy. In addition, providing practice experiences is a key way to alleviate test anxiety, since the more someone does something, the less anxiety provoking it usually is. Stress busters such as meditation, visualizing, and deep breathing can be helpful too.

Build Comfort on Test Day

Common-sense techniques can help a child feel ready and comfortable in the test situation:

- Gather and set aside test materials such as the ticket, pencils, a calculator, and a photo ID a few days in advance.
- The night before the test, get a good night's sleep. Don't cram.
- Eat a healthy breakfast.
- Leave early.
- Plan and confirm transportation and directions in advance.

Put Test Taking Into Perspective

Make sure that your child understands that while tests are important, they are only one factor that influences college decisions. There are many other elements of a college application that figure in, most importantly a child's grades in school. In addition, there isn't just one school that would be a good fit for your child. Help him or her to see that there are many colleges that would be good matches. This type of perspective building keeps unnecessary anxiety in check.

Standardized tests my child will take.

List the standardized tests or other examinations your child will take, and the testing dates.

Test

Date

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

What You Can Do Now

Below are some ways you can help your child work toward his or her future starting right now:

- **Create a positive environment in the home.** A supportive atmosphere and positive reinforcement go a long way toward helping a child achieve his or her goals.
- **Safeguard your child's work space.** In order to be successful, your child needs a quiet place to work and the space and tools to accomplish tasks. Help your child secure and protect the resources and space he or she needs.
- **Support good work habits.** You can help your child work by encouraging her or him to set time aside for studying each day, and then respect that schedule by not interrupting her or him during that period. You may also want to limit distractions during the work time that she or he chooses by turning off the TV, phones, music, or other possible distractions.
- **Pay attention to learning styles.** Different students learn in different ways. In fact, educators recognize seven different types of intelligence. Talk to your child about how he or she learns, and then allow him or her to work in the ways best suited to his or her learning style. (For more information on learning styles, review Unit 3 in *CollegeEd: Improving My Skills* with your child.)
- **Foster good nutrition.** Eating well is a significant component of school success. Children should start their day with a balanced breakfast, have a good lunch, and avoid too much sugar throughout the school day.
- **Respond to results.** The way that you respond to your child about his or her report cards, standardized test score reports, and other tests and assignments is key to helping your child move forward. Reinforce the idea that every challenge presents an opportunity, and help your child find those opportunities as appropriate.
- **Encourage self-exploration.** In order to find the appropriate future path, each child must learn about herself or himself and explore different skills and interests. Support this sort of exploration—every activity she or he participates in now will be helpful in the future by building his or her self-knowledge.
- **Talk about college and careers.** Speaking with your child about his or her future plans is key, not only because it helps you understand and communicate about your child's goals, but because it also reinforces your interest in making this future a reality.
- **Learn about financial planning for college.** If you haven't started already, don't wait to begin learning about the costs of a college education and what you can do now to start financial planning. For more information and advice, go to www.collegeboard.com/parents/pay.

Things I Need to Do...

- Make an appointment to meet with the school counselor and discuss my child's academic plan and progress.
- Talk to my child about his or her dreams and future aspirations, college plans, and test preparation skills.
- Set time aside weekly to talk about how things are going in school, not only academically but socially as well.
- Go to www.collegeboard.com/parents and explore the many tools available for me to be better informed in order to assist my child through this process.
- Other things I need to do...

Resources on Study Skills and College Planning

Study Skills Publications for Middle School Students

The Study Skills Handbook by Judith Dodge

Middle School Study Skills by John Ernst

Super Study Skills by Laurie Rozakis

Helpful Web Sites

www.collegeboard.com

Contains information on all aspects of preparing for college, with separate sections for students, parents, and teachers. Also has numerous tips and special articles.

www.ed.gov/thinkcollege

Has information on many aspects of higher education, with special sections for students, parents, and teachers. Includes information on preparing for college early.

www.thinkcollegeearly.org

Has information on choosing, applying, and paying for college and on the value of higher education.

www.finaid.org

Explains how to find scholarships that match special interests. Also has information on loans and college savings plans, financial aid applications, and college admissions and jobs.

www.fafsa.ed.gov

Leads you through the process of applying for federal financial aid and filling out the FAFSA.

www.salliemae.com

Has information about planning for college, applying for loans, managing your loans, finding a job, and finding and using financial aid services.

Things to Remember:

- College is for everyone.
- College is affordable.
- College is important for success.
- Start planning for college in middle school.
- Develop time management, test-prep, and study skills necessary for academic success.
- Explore interests, talents, and skills as the first step to college planning.
- Take rigorous, advanced courses. Take algebra as early as possible.
- Review middle and high school graduation requirements at the beginning of each school year.
- Look for opportunities in challenging situations.
- Start talking about and saving for college—it's never too early.
- Communicate with counselors and teachers regularly.

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