

SAT, ACT & Test-Optional: What Families Need to Know

Student and Family Handout

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Start Here: Where Testing Really Fits

More than two-thirds of colleges are test-optional today — but test-optional does not mean test-blind, and a growing number of schools are bringing testing requirements back. Curriculum rigor and a strong grade trend remain the single biggest factor in admissions decisions, but a solid SAT or ACT score is still one of the top factors colleges weigh, and it's one of the few parts of your application you can meaningfully improve with a plan. This handout covers what test-optional really means, whether to submit your score, which test fits you better, and key dates to plan around.

Test-Optional: What It Really Means

More than two-thirds of U.S. colleges are test-optional, but optional does not always mean neutral. At many selective schools, a strong score is still test-preferred in practice. Florida's Bright Futures scholarship requires a qualifying SAT or ACT score regardless of any college's own policy.

- **Already requiring scores:** Brown, CalTech, Carnegie Mellon, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Georgetown, Georgia Tech, Harvard, Johns Hopkins, MIT, Ohio State, Penn, Purdue, Rice, all U.S. Service Academies, Stanford, U Tennessee, UGA, U Miami, UT, and Yale, among others.
- **Adding requirements soon:** University of Alabama (fall 2027 for GPA below 3.0, all students by fall 2028) • Columbia (reinstated for fall 2027 admission) • Vanderbilt (test-optional through fall 2028, required starting fall 2029).

Why scores still matter:

- **College Board (2008, 220,000+ students):** SAT scores combined with high school GPA predicted first-year college grades more accurately than either measure alone — about 15% more predictive power than grades by themselves.
- **Dartmouth College (2024):** faculty research found test scores, evaluated alongside high school grades, were the most reliable indicators of student success — a key reason Dartmouth reinstated its testing requirement.
- **MIT (2022):** admissions leaders reported the university could not reliably predict student success without weighing test results together with grades and coursework.
- **Opportunity Insights (2024):** among students with similar high school grades, those with higher SAT/ACT scores earned notably higher first-year college GPAs.

Should You Send Your Score?

- Your score is at or above a college's middle 50% range → Submit
- Your score is below the range, but you have other strong scores (AP, IB, AICE) or a notable hook → Consider submitting selectively; check that school's specific guidance
- Your score is meaningfully below the range → Consider withholding, unless the school requires it or you need it for merit aid or Bright Futures
- You're applying STEM or pre-med → A strong Math score often helps even at test-optional schools

The Digital SAT at a Glance

- Fully digital and adaptive, taken on a laptop or tablet (yours or the test center's) through College Board's Bluebook app
- Two sections, each split into two modules: Reading & Writing, and Math
- Section adaptive: your performance on Module 1 sets the difficulty of Module 2 in that section
- 1600-point scale • about 2 hours 14 minutes • 98 questions total
- Calculator allowed for every math question, built into the app
- Practice: 7 full-length practice SATs and 2 practice PSATs are free inside Bluebook

The Enhanced ACT at a Glance

- Rolled out nationally starting fall 2025: shorter overall, with more time per question
- Core test is English, Math, and Reading; Science and the optional Writing essay are no longer required
- 1-36 scoring scale; composite score is now the average of English, Math, and Reading

- About 2 hours without Science and Writing, 2 hours 45 minutes with Science added
- Offered both digitally and on paper (still not adaptive)
- **New in 2026:** ETS, the organization that wrote and scored the SAT for decades, acquired ACT. No changes to the test itself have been announced, but it's a name change worth knowing — and one to watch, since ACT is currently the only major admissions test still offered on paper.

Choosing Your Best-Fit Test: SAT vs ACT

Feature	SAT	ACT (Enhanced)
Format	Digital only, adaptive	Digital or paper, not adaptive
Core length	~2 hrs 14 min	~2 hrs (no Science/Writing)
Sections	Reading & Writing, Math	English, Math, Reading (+ optional Science, Writing)
Scoring scale	200-1600	1-36
Calculator	Allowed on all math	Allowed on all math

Key Dates: Your 2026-2027 Testing Calendar

Test	2026-2027 Dates	Scores Post
ACT	Oct 17, Dec 12, 2026 • Feb 27, Apr 10, Jun 12, Jul 10, 2027	~10 days after test date
SAT	Oct 3, Nov 7, Dec 5, 2026 • Mar 6, May 1, Jun 5, 2027	~2 weeks after test date

Seniors: additional SAT and ACT dates run through December of senior year, and scores can still be sent after you submit applications.

Your Testing Game Plan

- **Fall (Oct–Dec):** Take the PSAT and/or a full practice SAT and ACT. Compare section by section, not just total scores.
- **Winter (Jan–Feb):** Choose your primary test based on that comparison. Start a structured prep plan.
- **Spring (Mar–Jun):** Take your first official test. Leave time for at least one retake before senior year.
- **Summer before senior year:** Retake if needed. Aim to have your final score(s) in hand before September of senior year.

How We Can Help

Score At The Top offers private, small group, and virtual SAT/ACT prep, along with college counseling and academic tutoring.

Boca Raton 561-241-1610 | Coral Springs 954-510-0600 | Palm Beach Gardens 561-626-2662 | Wellington 561-333-8882 | Weston 954-510-0600

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