Educator Perspectives: Insights on Test Preparation in Schools with State and District Testing

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CONCLUSIONS

Schools that have had the most success in improving their students' scores on the ACT reported the following:

- Use student data for instructional decision-making.

- Increase awareness of the capabilities of ACT Online Prep and other test preparation tools.

- Balance timing of instruction to optimize engagement and learning.

- Tailor instruction to students' needs.

- Evaluate test preparation initiatives for their effectiveness.

- Focus on content and test-taking strategies.

- Integrate methods to improve student engagement.

SO WHAT?

The shared experiences and perspectives may provide useful insight for other educators grappling with similar challenges across the country.

NOW WHAT?

Common goals and challenges that emerged from this study include:

- The early identification of students who will need extra support to meet state score standards and customizing instruction to address their individual needs.

- Developing scalable instructional practices that address gaps in content knowledge while familiarizing students with test question formats and practice in applying test-taking strategies.

- Devising instructional practices that are engaging for students and improve motivation.

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Introduction

High-stakes, standardized testing plays an important role in the lives of many students as they apply to college and compete for scholarships. In states where college readiness measures, like the ACT® test, are used for school and district accountability, the ACT scores of all students, whether college-bound or not, are a top priority for school administrators and teachers. To ensure all students meet the proficiency standards set by states for each subject, educators are employing a multifaceted approach to prepare students for taking the ACT test. In this paper, we report some of the strategies, practices, and perspectives educators shared with us in the hope that their insights may prove beneficial to others.

The Study

In Spring 2019, we asked 1,225 principals or assistant principals of schools that had purchased ACT Online Prep (AOP) if faculty and staff at their schools who are involved in test preparation would be willing to participate in a study investigating their experiences with AOP and test preparation in general. Seventy educators from 58 different schools expressed an interest in participating in the study. We asked them about the following aspects of test preparation at their school:

1. The role they play in test preparation

2. The types of test preparation activities offered

3. Test preparation strategies taught to students

4. School culture or context and the influence this has on test preparation

In analyzing the data from the 70 respondents, it became clear that schools where the ACT is used for accountability offered a greater range of test preparation activities and took a more rigorous approach to test preparation than schools without State and District Testing. As a result, ACT researchers selected 18 survey respondents from these schools with State and District Testing for in-depth interviews to learn more about their efforts to prepare their students for the ACT. We used the responses from the survey to shape the in-depth interview questions (see Appendix for additional information). The common themes that emerged are presented and discussed below.

Scheduling Test Preparation During and/or Outside of School Hours

Interview participants reported that their schools provide test preparation in a variety of session formats held either during or outside of school hours. These include courses offered during the school day (e.g., homeroom/advisory, study hall, or elective courses), short-term workshops or bootcamps (either during or outside of school hours), in-school tutoring by teachers, and in-school or weekend test preparation courses offered by test preparation companies. After-school test prep activities are usually optional and based on student needs (e.g., small group tutoring, tailored test prep instruction). Several schools reported covering the additional cost of after-school or weekend test preparation for students who struggle to meet the required benchmark scores set by the state.

> *"The PreACT they [students] take in September, and it takes a couple of weeks for us to get the scores back and make the goals. We start the test prep program in [the] beginning of November and continue for 4.5 months of the weekly sessions [2x per week] before they take the final [ACT]."*

The number of weeks dedicated to test preparation, both in terms of content review and test-taking strategies, varies from eight weeks to the whole academic year. A common practice mentioned is dedicating 30 minutes during the advisory or homeroom period on a regular basis (e.g., two times per week is common) for test preparation. Another reported approach is including ACT content in subject courses starting in the fall semester/quarter. Several schools reported that they focus on test-taking strategies 8-12 weeks before the statewide spring ACT test.

Evaluating Students' Test Scores Prior to Preparing for the ACT

> *"Our goal is each year starting from the 9th grade we want them to improve 3 or more points."*

> *"We do a mock ACT starting at 9th grade, we look at that data, and we want to grow those scores and increase those scores in the next couple of years for those students."*

> *"The Pre-ACT is used with sophomores where they take it in the Spring and in the Fall. We then work with the students in their junior year to show how far they grew. Students then goal set with both the principal and the counselor based on that growth in their sophomore year. They make a goal of what they want to get on the ACT [based on growth from their sophomore year scores]."*

A common practice of school educators when developing their test preparation activities is using students' test data from previous years to group students with similar needs. Some schools use the PreACT®, ACT® Aspire®, or NWEA's MAP Growth test taken during 9th and 10th grades as longitudinal data to get earlier ACT score predictions. Educators use these tests to look at students' scores in the different subject areas to determine the content areas to target and include in the students' test preparation activities. Otherwise, educators use the scores for goal-setting, where either the educator or student identifies by how many points they would expect to improve after they participate in the test preparation.

Primary Focus is on Test-Taking Strategies Followed by Core Content Knowledge in Test Preparation Instruction

> *"Our home room period is about 30 minutes long, and each grade level has a particular curriculum that they work with. Our Juniors, we have our upper-level English teacher, our upper-level Math teacher, and our upper-level Science teacher that run those home room periods... and go through how to take those tests, test-taking skills, and then some of the basic skills you need to know to do well on English, Reading, Science, so on and so forth."*

Test preparation activities during school hours such as the homeroom/advisory period or study hall commonly include taking the ACT practice test, reviewing and practicing test-taking strategies, addressing specific subject area deficits, test familiarity, and answering ACT sample questions. Several teachers interviewed indicated that they include some form of test preparation in their subject courses (English, math, science, history). For example, multiple interviewees said that ACT questions are used as "bell-ringers" to start their classes (bell-ringers are activities usually at the start of a class that may consist of questions, problems, or tasks to engage students). Some teachers also reported adopting ACT test items or item formats when giving and discussing subject-related problems in class. For example, a biology teacher might include reading and interpretation of graphs and diagrams in class discussions.

> *"I think the most helpful thing to include is test-taking strategies in general and I don't know that the kids are getting those."*

> *"For math, I teach them how to work backwards for math. You take the answer choices and substitute it back into the problem and figure out what the actual answer is."*

> *"Well, some students thought it was OK to just skim the passages and one of the things we talk about is the benefits of actually reading the passages in the entirety. They learn to identify who are the characters, what are the conflicts, what are key points. So, we talk about this in my class and practice it in the program."*

Even though it is common to use different instructional approaches for test preparation across schools, most interview participants reported their schools focus more heavily on test-taking strategies for their test preparation instruction than domain knowledge in subject areas. Test-taking strategies are viewed by interviewed school personnel as an effective way to help students boost ACT scores, with one interviewee even saying that they are "the most important thing to know."

Using Test Preparation Software or Resources

> *"It has been more independent study with AOP… Ideally, we need to get it to where it is individual paced, but we need more adult feedback too. It [AOP] gives them pretty solid predictors of where their skill sets are at and where their weaknesses are at. And also, at some point, it starts to give you a pretty good indicator of how you will do on the various sub-tests."*

During in-school test preparation sessions, students can work through test preparation software or tools provided by the school in individual, self-study mode. ACT Online Prep (AOP) is typically used this way in schools with enough computers. With AOP, the practice ACT test feature is commonly administered to students as practice for the actual ACT test. Other AOP features that test preparation facilitators find their students using or exploring include the practice questions and lessons. Students typically work independently with teachers keeping them on task and occasionally answering questions.

Often, teachers interviewed were not fully aware of what AOP offers, and they do not undergo extensive preparation when implementing AOP. Teachers or administrators who facilitate test preparation sessions indicated that AOP is often used as a turn-key solution for students to explore and learn its content. Using AOP does not require any specialized knowledge or lesson planning on the part of teachers; they just focus on supervising students and keeping them on task.

There is a range of other test preparation resources, tools, and programs schools use for test preparation instruction. The Official ACT Prep Guide is a staple resource for schools when designing their test preparation activities. Other test preparation products used in schools include OnToCollege, Method Test Prep, USA Test Prep, and CASE. Interviewees also mentioned instructional software used in their test preparation instruction that feature online instructional videos or games such as IXL Learning or iReady.

Varying Engagement of Students in Test Preparation Activities

> *"I found my own videos online—instructional videos that other teachers have made. Next year, I will be using Shmoop, they have a lot of interactive videos for test prep... Shmoop is like a competition-based program, like virtual currency, like game-based format… That's how 21st century learners learn now."*

> *"People [teachers] use the app Kahoot [to spice up test prep]; some teachers use Jeopardy... We really just copy-and-paste questions and answers [into Kahoot]. I have only done it a handful of times with them this semester, but they enjoy that more than just sitting there doing some sort of paper question sheet."*

Most interview participants described the engagement of students when participating in test preparation to be dependent on the test preparation activity itself, the student's motivation, and the student's ability.

> *"The biggest challenge for us is keeping the kids motivated to do it [test prep] because when you are talking about something that is 8 months away, how do I get my kids to fully engage in it all of the time. The kids are usually pretty excited about it for about 3 weeks and then it becomes a grind for them."*

For example, students were found to be more engaged when the subject area of focus for test preparation activities changed every few weeks (i.e., from English to math to science to reading). This approach added variety and helped maintain student interest. Students were also found to be keen on preparing for the test when the benefits of getting a high test score or improving their score (i.e., increased scholarship money) were communicated to them.

Educators also find that they interact most with high-achieving students who are highly motivated and more frequently ask about the test and what strategies to use. However, there are a significant number of students partaking in test preparation who generally lack motivation (e.g., "do not care about the test," or do not plan to go to college) and thus show low engagement in these activities. Several educators we spoke with reported efforts to gamify test prep by creating Kahoots or Quizlets with ACT questions to make test preparation more interactive for students.

Summary of Practices that Produce Results

While the 18 interviewees from schools with State and District Testing programs represent only a small number of educators seeking to help students increase their scores on the ACT, their shared experiences and perspectives may provide useful insight for other educators grappling with similar challenges across the country. The reoccurring themes that emerged from these conversations suggest a common set of goals and challenges faced by educators where the ACT test plays a prominent role not only for students, but also for schools and districts. It is our hope that sharing these experiences and perspectives more broadly may help educators in their efforts to prepare students for taking the ACT test.

As a summary to the themes discussed above, schools that have had the most success in improving their students' scores on the ACT reported the following:

- **Use student data for instructional decision-making**. Collecting data in the 9th and 10th grade that help predict ACT scores and guide the development of test preparation instruction and materials.

- **Increase awareness of the capabilities of ACT Online Prep and other test preparation tools.** If teachers, principals, and assessment specialists are knowledgeable about the features and capabilities offered by test preparation tools, they can more effectively integrate these tools into test preparation initiatives.

- **Balance timing of instruction to optimize engagement and learning.** With the need to integrate and balance content review and test-taking strategy instruction while maintaining student engagement, optimizing the timing and duration of these activities prior to the testing is important.

- **Tailor instruction to students' needs.** Identifying students who will need extra help to achieve benchmark scores set by the state and providing instruction targeting those students' academic skill needs.

- **Evaluate test preparation initiatives for their effectiveness.** Evaluating test preparation initiatives at the end of each year and adjusting offerings for the coming year.

- **Focus on content and test-taking strategies.** Integrating content review and subject-specific test preparation activities into instruction throughout the year in addition to instruction focusing on test-taking strategies.

- **Integrate methods to improve student engagement.** Using game-based and other interactive learning materials and varying subject content to increase variety and make test preparation activities more engaging for students.

In our ongoing effort to better understand the test preparation practices implemented in schools and to disseminate those practices that produce the best results, we appreciate the insights shared with us by educators in this report and we would love to hear what you are doing in your school and how it is working for you. Please contact us at: ACTResearchTestPrep@act.org.

Appendix

The semi-structured interviews with 18 participants (see Table 1) were approximately one hour in length and began with a short explanation of the purpose for the study, a guarantee that all comments would be strictly confidential, and a request for permission to record the interview. The interview protocol consisted of five sections, including an introduction, questions about participants' involvement in test preparation, usage or non-usage of AOP, perspectives on student attitudes and engagement, and ending with participants' perspectives on test preparation, in general. The protocol was used as a loose guide for the interviews with some key questions and others based on specific responses participants had given to survey questions, as well as some more general questions as possible follow-ups. The educators were paid $120 for completing the survey and participating in the interview.

Participants were from a variety of schools ranging from small and large urban settings as well as towns classified as distant or remote from urban centers. There were also several small, rural schools with fewer than 100 students in a graduating class. There was a mix of schools in terms of the percentage of students of color and socioeconomic status as measured by percentage of students on free or reduced lunch and Title I status. The majority of participants were teachers; however, there were also a number of principals and administrative staff responsible for implementing test preparation efforts represented in the sample. It is important to note that two schools had multiple study participants, one in Alabama and one in Wisconsin.

Table 1. Study Participants and School Demographics

Role	State	Locale	11th Grade Class Size	% Students of Color	% Free/Reduced Lunch	Title I
P	Alabama	Town: distant	182	52	63	No
T	Alabama	Town: distant	182	52	63	No
T	Alabama	City: small	404	38	14	No
T	Alabama	Town: distant	158	38	53	Yes
T	Alabama	City: small	404	38	14	No
T	Kentucky	City: large	536	52	42	Yes
AS	Mississippi	Town: distant	88	64	83	Yes
P	Nebraska	Rural: distant	33	13	25	No
T	Nebraska	Rural: distant	23	6	42	No
AS	Nebraska	Rural: remote	18	20	39	No
P	Nebraska	Town: remote	330	20	37	No
P	North Carolina	Town: distant	334	69	98	Yes
T	North Carolina	City: large	442	77	51	Yes
T	Oklahoma	Rural: distant	103	41	64	Yes
P	South Carolina	Suburb: small	71	46	100	No
T	Wisconsin	Town: distant	68	7	28	No
T	Wisconsin	Town: distant	68	7	28	No

Source: CCD Public school data 2017-2018, 2018-2019 school years.
* Note: CCD data were not available for one school from Alabama.

Role abbreviations:
AS = Administrative Staff
P = Principal
T = Teacher

CCD locale designations:

- *City, Large:* Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population of 250,000 or more.

- *City, Small:* Territory inside an urbanized area and inside a principal city with population less than 100,000.

- *Suburb, Small:* Territory outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with population less than 100,000.

- *Town, Distant:* Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area.

- *Town, Remote:* Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 35 miles from an urbanized area.

- *Rural, Distant:* Territory defined as rural by the Bureau of the Census that is more than 5 miles but no more than 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but no more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.

- *Rural, Remote:* Territory defined as rural by the Bureau of the Census that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.

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