

Testing 1-2-3

By Maliha Ikram

SAT and ACT prep courses can get you high scores — even if you're not a natural "test-taker."

Junior year. Dread is near. That's right, time to take (and succeed at) standardized tests. The road is a daunting one for some; for others, a walk in the park. But we're not interested in the park-walkers. The real question here is, how does someone who isn't a natural "test taker" do well on the SAT and ACT exams?

To "crack" the SAT/ACT code, you need a hacking system. And this hacking system is an SAT or ACT tutor or tutoring agency. These companies often come up with their own test prep books — different from those produced by the College Board — boasting that they have all the secrets to "solving" or "besting" the test. As Moshe Ohayon puts it, "This isn't a test of intelligence; it's a game. And you can get someone to prep you like they would in tennis or chess."

Ohayon is the owner of Louisville Tutoring Agency, a center located in St. Matthews on Westport Road that was established in 2005. Ohayon says that Kentucky largely concentrates on the ACT — the students who come to his agency are 10 percent SAT students and 90 percent ACT students — but there are certain factors to consider for choosing the right exam.

The first is commitment to *one* test. Though the ACT is more prevalent in Kentucky, most schools around the country accept both ACT and SAT scores. Taking both the SAT and ACT does not provide an "edge," Ohayon says, but rather hampers the student from putting his focus into mastering one (unless, of course, you're someone who seems to excel at everything). "I have a particular way that I like to prep students," Ohayon says. If a student is familiar with the PSAT exam taken earlier on in high school for national merit honor, the tutor prefers that he or she continue on with the SAT. If not, the ACT may be the more viable option.

Once the student chooses a test, the best thing to do is devise a plan of action. There

are endless books, tutors, courses and online resources, and visiting your school's guidance counselor is a good place to start. Ohayon finds that the best time to begin standardized test preparation is freshman year of high school because it is low-intensity. He finds that 50 to 60 percent of students come in during their junior year — and even some in senior year — which is a time of high pressure. Sophomore and freshman years are great times to start preparing because that gives early exposure to the kind of "game" that standardized tests are. Students can learn to regard the ACT or SAT differently than school tests.

A particular student of Ohayon's, a senior at DuPont Manual High School, found out firsthand how beneficial test preparation is. "He came to me in eighth grade for test prep," the tutor says. "We did it low intensity, and eventually he got a 34 on the ACT, national merit on the PSAT, and in the 2,300 range on the SAT. All of his friends think he is a genius, but that isn't the case here and he would tell you so. It is a result of learning the game early and how and when to pay attention. It is knowing when to work a question to completion and when not to."

The student got the same amount of prep as a junior would have but spread it out over a couple of years rather than cramming it all in at once. He got into Vanderbilt and was offered a four-year scholarship. "Value-wise, test prep is the best bet for college," Ohayon says. To put this in numerical terms, in 2013 the average ACT score in Kentucky was a 19.6. Nationally, it was 20.9. Vanderbilt University's average incoming freshman range is 32 to 34. Test prep makes a difference.

However, one of the struggles Ohayon sees with lengthening test prep is the cost. Traditionally, the cost of tutoring services for standardized exams is expensive — private one-hour sessions run in the \$90 range and group classes range from \$30 to \$50. The

agency recommends classes at least once a week to stay up to speed. The total number of recommended classes varies based on the student's goals (scores needed for scholarships or desired schools) and how early the student begins test prep (freshman versus senior year). It can add up. A prep book to study on your own time can cost about \$20, but it is hard to grasp the strategies without a tutor. "Financially, it is smart for parents to spend hundreds to thousands of dollars to prep their children so they don't have to pay \$30,000 a year in tuition should they win scholarships," Ohayon says.

But Ohayon is also concerned for the students who do not have the means to afford the test prep necessary to do well on the SAT and ACT. That's why he started Educational Justice, a nonprofit located at the Louisville Tutoring Agency that strives to make resources available to lesser-privileged children. Educational Justice uses skilled volunteer tutors and educators to bring no-cost tutoring programs to students, effectively eliminating education inequity. "Test prep shouldn't be a class system," Ohayon says. "And the wealthy shouldn't be the ones getting scholarships at the expense of those of lesser economic status just because they had the money to tutor their children. That's just terrible." Other free resources exist. Khan Academy, a national nonprofit organization that recently partnered with College Board, offers no-fee online test prep with interactive tutorials.

There is no reason not to prepare for the SAT and ACT. And as we now know, preparation doesn't have to be a pricey option, as there are now avenues available for free or minimal cost. To avoid the dread, grab the test by the horns and have a coach handy so you learn the tricks of the trade.

The College Board has noted the disconnect between what is taught in school and what is tested on the SAT. It announced in March that the test is undergoing changes and a new version will replace the current one in spring of 2016.