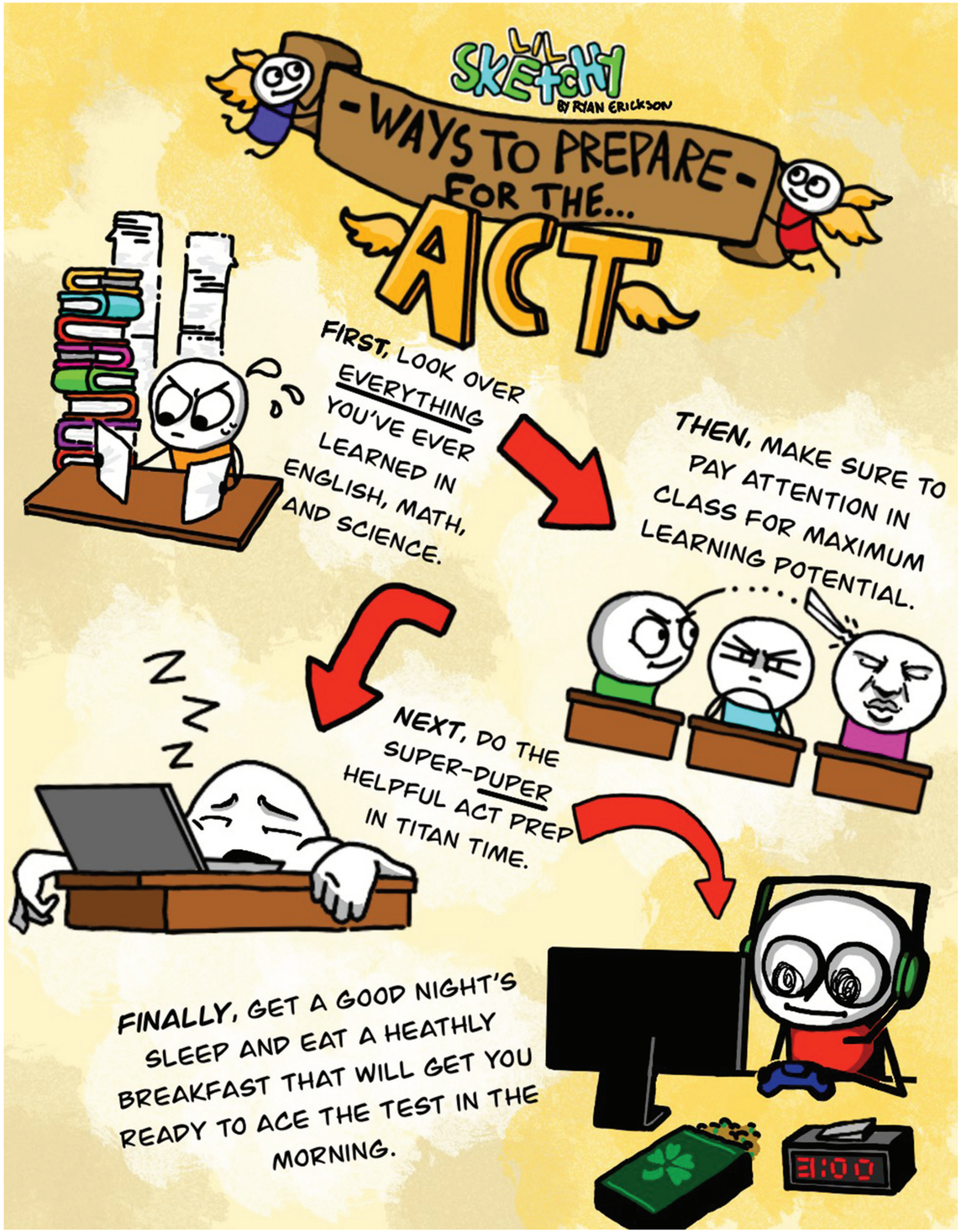


(cartoon by Ryan Erickson)

Testing new limits

BY MARLIE BEST

The ACT isn't what it used to be. Science is now optional, but is still recommended for students to take for college, and there are question and timing changes in all sections. With these changes starting late last year and being in full force for the 2025-26 school year, many colleges and high schools are not yet sure what to think.

"We've had a couple testing rounds with the new format," Papio South ACT prep coordinator Ms. Jessica Sturgeon said. "It's supposed to be more student-friendly, because it's shorter time and less questions."

The new format gives students more time to think and finish.

"Even though you wouldn't think five extra minutes makes a difference, there were some students that did say, 'I was able to finish the Reading section this time,'" post-secondary guidance counselor Ms. Renee Mead said.

Students should be aware when doing prep that some course materials may not be up to date.

Why students should care

Students have received mixed signals, many times extreme, over the years about the significance of the ACT, how much it really matters, and whether the test could determine everything that happens with the rest of their life.

Head Principal Jeff Spilker is trying to change this, putting more emphasis on simply taking the test and investing into testing culture.

The school saw a significant 1.5-point drop in its statewide testing composite average for last year's juniors, this year's seniors. PreACT scores for the class had hinted at a drop, but it was bigger than expected.

Test scores are published in local newspapers, are meant to show what students are grasping, and are a big factor in school rankings.

"So for me, yes, our average score and our students' scores reflect on our school," Spilker said.

For some, ACT results represent the quality of the school, but for others the ACT may be about how other people view the school.

"Our community invests a lot in our students," Sturgeon said, "so I think being able to show what our students have learned and the skills they have is important."

With ranking, ACT scores often become a competition among schools.

"[The ACT is] one piece of the whole puzzle that people have to look at when they're looking at schools," Mead said. "Strength of curriculum and how good their schools are, it's just one small piece of it; but unfortunately, it's always in the paper and it becomes a discussion, 'How are students doing?'"

Some students may not worry too much about the ACT because they already know they don't want to go to college, but it can still be beneficial to put in a little preparation.

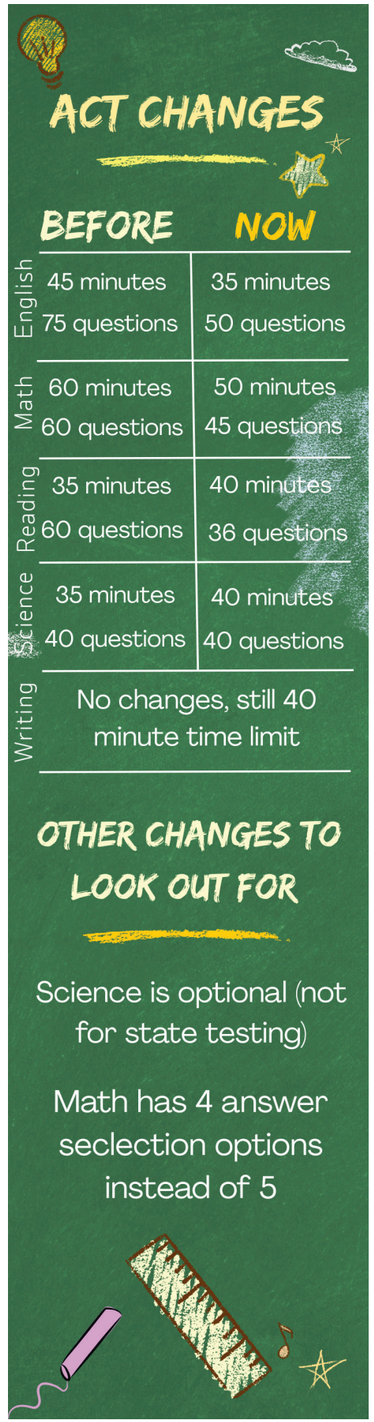
"It's still a good thing to kind of show yourself just for your own self-pride," Sturgeon said. "Your name goes on that test, and that's your score. Some students maybe do better than they think they would, and maybe have more options than they thought they would."

After COVID altered schools' use of the ACT, the test is being reincorporated for college admission, and it continues to be used for scholarship purposes, so taking the test more than once can pay off for many students.

"I would say, on average, our students probably take the ACT a couple more times on their own," Mead said. "Spending one Saturday and 72 bucks, if your score goes up a point or two, and that gets you a $2,000 scholarship, that's a good investment in time and money."

There are thousands of scholarships that come from doing well on the ACT, and it can give a student some opportunity, but the test isn't everything. Standardized tests don't define a person's intelligence or full capabilities, Mead emphasized.

"I always think of a GPA as a reflection of long-term learning, what you've been learning over a semester. Whereas a standardized test score is a one-day thing," Mead said. "Then it gets down to which one is a better or more accurate reflection of what a student really does know." *(continues)*



(infographic by Marlie Best)

(continued)

Titan Time ACT prep:

Titan Time on Wednesday is set aside for ACT prep, especially for sophomores and juniors. It's a relatively quick and easy way for all students to fit a little preparation into their weekly routine.

"We try to encourage all students to do it to help for their ACT," Sturgeon said. "We know students don't like to do it, especially during their Titan Time – it's kind of a lot of students' downtime during the day, so it's hard when you're tempted to do other things."

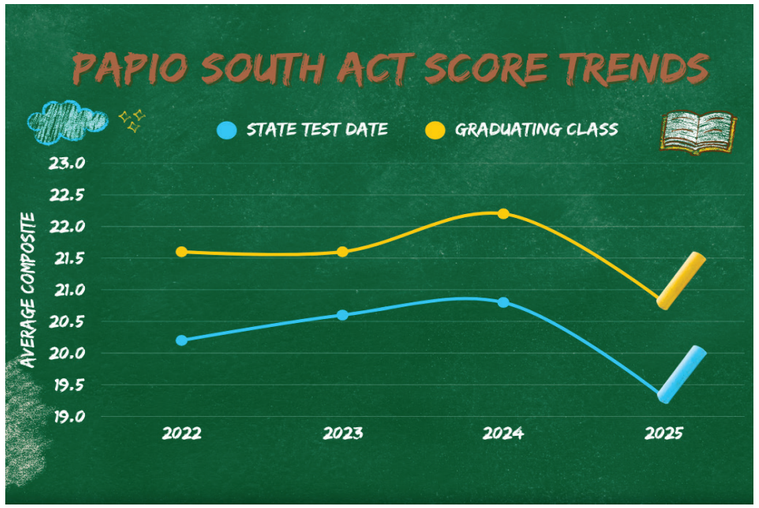
With Sturgeon being the main coordinator of Titan Time ACT prep, she wanted her lessons to help them slow down and take time to look at what could be offered and learned beyond the test.

"I was trying to give students skills or things to think about that they could use not just for ACT, but just for anything," Sturgeon said. "...Almost all of us will have to take some sort of test, like for our job, no matter what, even if we don't go to post-secondary education."

Many students take the ACT multiple times and already know the format of the test, so some of the earlier lessons in Titan Time prep might seem repetitive, but future lessons will expand on other aspects of the test.

There are numerous alternatives for ACT prep offered not only in the district but online, nationally, and in-person throughout the Omaha metro area, but most of that prep requires more time and money.

"I hope to provide quality free content for [students] so they can, if this is the only prep that they do, they don't have to pay for it on their own or spend additional time prepping," Sturgeon said. "...At least provide that baseline of content and information, have a place for them to go to get that information."



(infographic by Marlie Best)

District prep

The school district offers four Saturday prep classes with different sections of the ACT in the fall and then again in the spring before the statewide ACT test date. Experienced teachers from the district teach these three-hour sessions.

This prep was offered at two different levels in previous years, but this year's prep is all one level.

"We didn't do that this year because the test format has changed, so we didn't have anything to go off of," Sturgeon said. "While the scores are supposed to be similar, we didn't want to put it out there that we could offer this kind of intense focus type of class until we were certain what the ACT was going to look like."

For the science section of the district prep, the course focused on the format of the test, followed by types of questions that could come up along with pacing, and it ended with a full-time science practice test followed by a review of correct and incorrect answers.

Senior Teddy Wiberg, who retook the test and raised his score enough to join the school's 3-Point Jump Club, said he found the district prep beneficial.

"The prep that helped the most was the English ACT prep course. It did not necessarily teach me more about grammar, but it taught me a lot of patterns within the English section of the ACT," Wiberg said. "Once I was able to understand these patterns, my score improved a lot. I would recommend this prep course to other students."

Advice for personal prep

Preparing to take the ACT can seem daunting, but there are many resources available to students.

Mead recommends before starting any prep, to just go ahead and take an ACT. Take it cold turkey, without any of the prep, and no stressing – to just get a feel for where a student is at, she suggested.

"My hope when students are taking these kinds of tests is that they look at it as, 'OK, this is where I'm doing well, here are some areas that maybe I could work on to help improve my score,'" Mead said.

"And maybe when they take the test, they can see, 'Oh, I didn't do very well in this section of reading,' so then that'll help them kind of focus and prepare before taking an ACT again."

Available student resources ranging in price from free to thousands of dollars, but ultimately it's about what studying and prep process will work best for the individual.

"The ACT is a very long, strenuous test. Even with the new changes, … a lot of students don't have the attention span for the test right now," Sturgeon said. "And so focusing on the test materials and only the test materials during prep time will help with that."

Doing well on the ACT can open up opportunities for the individual and reflect positively on the school, but the reality of the ACT is that it does not determine everything. Colleges and scholarships will look at grades, letters of recommendations, essays, and possibly even more.

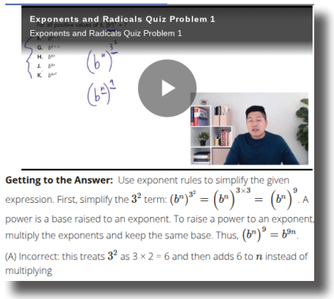
"The ACT does not define you. Once you get into college, nobody's probably going to ask you about your ACT score again," Mead said. "It's a hoop that you have to jump through for that next step after high school."

GUEST REVIEW: Online ACT Course

BY GREYSEN HARRIS

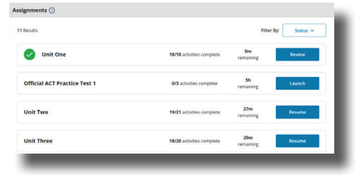
I would without a doubt recommend that every student uses the online self-paced ACT prep course. (That is only if they can afford it or if they qualify for an ACT fee waiver. It costs a whopping $179! That's highway robbery!) At first, it seemed like a waste of time.

Everything seemed so easy in the earlier lessons, but you don't realize how much 'easy stuff' you actually forget when you constantly cram your brain with new information on a daily basis. I think the structure of the lessons is something that really struck me as a big help:



When you begin a topic, the lesson starts with a video. It first explains a concept to you, then it provides a sample question. It isn't interactive, but you are encouraged to pause the video and solve the question.

Then, you are shown a step-by-step guide on how to solve the problem.

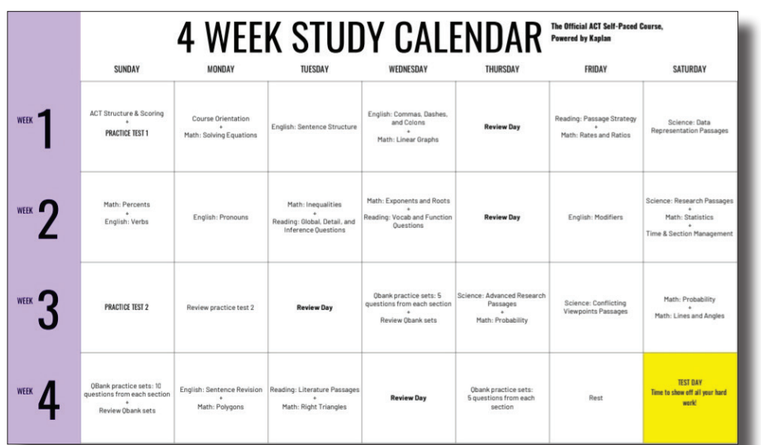


This process repeats for however many concepts are in that lesson. After the video, you are given three questions to answer. This is timed, and once you complete the questions, you are told whether or not you were correct. A video explanation is provided for all three questions.

After those questions, you are presented with more, but these ones only have a written explanation for the solutions. I think this process really helps solidify the information you learned. This prep course also provides five practice ACT tests with scores and solutions.

One other aspect of this prep course that I found to be useful is the provided day-by-day plans. This course provides you with a six-week study calendar, a four-week study calendar, and a two-week study calendar. These calendars lay out what lessons to complete each day depending on how much time you have to prepare for the ACT.

I wholeheartedly believe the reason I was able to jump from a 26 to a 31 is due to the self-paced ACT prep course.



PREP COURSE RECS. FROM SENIORS IN 3-POINT JUMP CLUB

Tyler Andringa recommends:
Official ACT book
"I could take as many practice tests as I wanted and do as many practice problems as I wanted. It helped me pace myself and learn what types of questions were common. It also helped refresh me on the math problems and grammar rules that I needed to know."

Maddie Larsen recommends:
John Baylor's On To College
"The best prep is taking practice tests so you can learn from your mistakes and work on timing."

Ally Fan recommends:
Aim High Test Prep
"The ACT only has so many questions to ask, so know all example questions and practice them – don't just do practice exams, actually study the questions. Still do practice exams though. I did one to two subjects every day for nine days up until the ACT."

(infographic by Marlie Best)