

Minnesota Principals Academy – Action Learning Project

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ACT and PSAT preparation: One High School's Effort to Increase Engagement in Pre-test Practice and Preparation

Abstract

This Action Learning Project was initiated as a result of two things. The first was the district's desire to increase test scores. Specifically, to raise PSAT scores to produce more National Merit Semi-Finalists, and to raise ACT scores beyond high level of predicted score, based on the PLAN assessment. The second instigator was the work of teachers who saw a need to help students. Teachers sought ways to help their students who frequently asked them for help with ACT preparation or who expressed concerns and anxiety over upcoming ACT assessments. Some of these teachers provide ACT tutoring on their own, privately, and wanted to find a way to help more students.

Vision: A school of excellence.

The vision for this project was to examine ways to continue Minnetonka High School's reputation for academic excellence in the PSAT (as evidenced by National Merit Semifinalists) and the ACT (as evidenced by growth beyond the predicted level of achievement from the PLAN / ASPIRE to the ACT) to levels comparable to that of other standardized assessments, such as the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments.

Background / Context:

Minnetonka School district is a public school district located in Minnetonka, Minnesota, a western suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota. The district has one high school, Minnetonka High School, which had a 2012 graduation rate of 96.3% (state average was 77.6%), and approximately 91% of its graduates are college-bound. The high school had an enrollment of about 2850 students, during the 2013-2014 school year. All students take the PSAT free of charge during the school day as juniors, and as an option for sophomores. Prior to April 2015 when Minnesota required a statewide administration of the ACT to all juniors, approximately 90% of Minnetonka High School students took the ACT. For the class of 2013-2014 the average composite score was 26.5, with a PLAN predicted score of 25.8.

What we did:

Minnetonka High School created a “PSAT Academy” and an “ACT Academy” to help prepare students prior to taking these assessments. Part of this preparation was in test taking skills and tips, as well as study and correction of common errors. But these academies also aimed at helping students feel more comfortable and confident as a result of feeling more prepared, knowing that this could produce higher, or at least more accurate scores. As part of these academies, we increased communication and information to students and families, and offered a full-length practice test with accompanying study sessions, as well as a test preparation Schoology website available to all juniors. We also targeted a group of at-risk students and increased communication to this group regarding the preparation sessions.

What we found out:

We found that most students felt more comfortable and confident going into these assessments after the preparation sessions:

- 91% of respondents in the ACT sessions
- 100% of respondents in the PSAT sessions

Students reported they were much more likely to continue to study or practice on their own as a result of attending the sessions, where they were given practice and study tips, and shown how to access this information on their own:

- 91% of respondents in the ACT sessions indicated positively
- respondents in the PSAT sessions indicated a likelihood of 4.1 / 5

The students who were targeted as an at-risk population had greater levels of participation:

- 52% participation rate for targeted students vs. 38% for entire junior class

Implications for practice:

While more evidence is needed, the academies were well attended, well received, and students indicated they were helpful and would like them to continue. Students and parents reported that when parents are informed, they were more likely to encourage participation of their students. Both parents and students reported that parent dictate was one of the main reasons students attended the sessions. Test scores for participants and non-participants will need to be examined to determine if the practice and study sessions.