

# PreACT: The Rebirth of ACT Plan

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By Adam Ingersoll | March 24, 2016 | ACT



*Starting in 2016-2017, high schools will have the option to offer students a lightweight warm-up to the ACT. The rationale for the new PreACT offering and the potential benefits for students and schools are explored in this post.*

Once upon a time (from 1987-2014), ACT Inc. offered a test called ACT Plan as a sophomore prelude to the full ACT. The Plan, which started life as the P-ACT+, was never as popular as College Board's Preliminary SAT (PSAT) for several reasons:

- ACT Plan limited its focus to sophomores
- PSAT is paired with the National Merit Scholarship program
- During the first 52 years after its introduction in 1959, ACT played second-fiddle to the more popular SAT, so Plan played second-fiddle to the PSAT





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as a “feeder” test.

ACT justified its 2014 abandonment of the Plan by claiming the need to [make room for a new product](#), ACT Aspire. Instead of a standalone exam, Aspire was meant to be a family of products from grades 3 through 10 that would provide school districts and state departments of education with the kind of curricular and efficacy feedback required in a Common Core world. In “going big,” ACT lost sight of the need for a direct warm-up for the ACT. In theory, schools could offer just a 10th grade Aspire, but compared to Plan, the new test was much longer, much more expensive, and far more complicated to administer. As a replacement plan for the Plan, Aspire has failed.

The replacement for the replacement was revealed this week with [ACT’s announcement](#) that a “new” product for 10th graders (and only for 10th graders) will be offered in 2016-2017. The unsightly named [PreACT](#) will be available for schools to order in May, can be administered anytime from September 1 through June 1, and is offered at \$12 per student — undercutting the PSAT’s cost of \$15 per student. The PreACT will include somewhat shorter versions of ACT’s English, Math, Reading, and Science tests, but it will not include the ACT’s optional essay assignment. It will provide “predictive scores” on ACT’s familiar 1-36 scale.

ACT has decided that schools will be allowed to offer the PreACT to 10th graders only, not 11th graders. The PreACT scoring will be normed for 10th graders, so 11th graders would get inflated estimates of their projected ACT scores. And, ACT’s management may prefer that 11th graders focus on taking the full ACT test.

The \$12 PreACT is a useful offering that will definitely meet a need. Schools planning to offer the PSAT to 10th graders now have an alternative that costs less and provides a preview of the more popular ACT. ACT also promises that PreACT scores will be returned in just 2-3 weeks, whereas PSAT score reports typically take 2-3 months. How ACT plans to pull off this feat, especially given school-chosen testing dates throughout the academic year, is not yet clear.



Unfortunately, it is problematic for ACT to have made this abrupt announcement of a the PreACT less than six months before its debut. Many high schools have already



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Aspire again; should we junk that and go with the PreACT?" Compass' advice to schools will be "Yes, go with the PreACT unless you're sure you need the Aspire's bells and whistles."

More specific details on the construction of the PreACT are not yet readily available. An [EdWeek report](#) indicates the PreACT may be one hour and 55 minutes long, which would make it exactly the same length as the discontinued ACT Plan. The test's length and its 10th grade timing mean that students and educators need to keep the exam's limitations in mind. If it were possible to shorten the length of the ACT test by one hour without impairing its reliability (scoring stability from test to test), such a reduction would be done in a heartbeat and roundly cheered. Compass has always cautioned against ascribing too much precision to a 10th grade practice test, and this grain of salt is even grainier when applied to the PreACT.

The PreACT offers schools a compelling, if imperfect, option. Many schools partner with Compass to offer full ACT practice tests to their 10th (and 11th) graders. We will be evaluating the question of PreACT vs. full, practice ACT on a case-by-case basis with each school. A complete ACT practice test, with its essay and improved score reliability, will continue to be the best alternative for some. We will also look carefully at whether we can depend on a 2-3 week turnaround time for PreACT scoring. (Our internal scoring processes require only 2-3 days.) Many schools are already finalizing their programming for 2016-2017 and need to know whether they can confidently schedule meetings and presentations around score availability dates.

Students who have sat for a College Board or ACT offering are well aware of lengthy surveys they are asked to complete as part of the registration process. The PreACT will include an "Interest Inventory" component, which will feed [ACT's Educational Opportunity Service offering](#), whereby student profiles are sold to colleges (for 42 cents apiece, in case you're wondering) for marketing purposes. If you think that the need to populate those marketing databases was not a factor in the PreACT's rebirth, then you're less cynical than I am.



It's also hard not to be cynical when the spin from ACT's public relations department refuses to acknowledge the obvious. [Nancy Griesemer with Examiner.com](#)



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*districts around the country prepare students for college and career. PreACT is not a replacement for ACT Aspire. These are two very different assessments designed for different purposes."*

However, from just two years ago, we have a [statement from that same ACT spokesperson about replacing the Plan](#) with the Aspire rather than keeping the older product in play at the same time: *"It doesn't make much sense to create a [grade] 3-11 aligned system [Aspire and ACT] and have this test [Plan] sitting out there."*

The obvious reality of the situation is that the Plan was discontinued in 2014 with the expectation that schools would migrate to the multi-layered, multi-purpose Aspire, which offered more long-term revenue potential to ACT. Whether ACT will admit it or not, we'll give them credit for swiftly recognizing that they erred in dropping the Plan and realizing the need for a course-correction with the PreACT.



## About Adam Ingersoll

Adam began his career in test prep in 1993 while at the University of Southern California, where he was a student-athlete on the basketball team, worked in the admission office, and graduated *magna cum laude*. Over the last two decades he has guided thousands of families to successful experiences with standardized tests and has mentored hundreds of the industry's most sought-after tutors. Adam is known nationally as a leading expert on college admission testing and is a frequent presenter at higher ed conferences, faculty development workshops, and school seminars.

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**Shelly Hensley says:**[Reply](#)

March 31, 2016 at 8:47 am

I just called ACT and was told that we may elect to administer the PreACT to "other grades," although it was designed specifically for 10th graders. Thanks!

**Matt Steiner says:**[Reply](#)

April 1, 2016 at 10:49 am

Hi Shelly,

Thank you for the thoughtful question...and helpful response! Yes, we've heard that ACT is allowing the PreACT to be administered to different grade levels. This is further edification!

**Shelly Hensley says:**

March 31, 2016 at 8:39 am

benchmark with it before the all-important junior year PSAT. It’s the 9th graders at our school who need a worthwhile test, and we have been looking for a pre-ACT instrument to replace the PLAN. Many thanks from a Director of College Counseling at an independent school!

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