

The impact of COVID-19 on standardized testing for college

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PLAINEDGE, N.Y. - Plainedge High School on Long Island is just one school preparing its students for college during the coronavirus pandemic, an issue that is changing the way students will apply to college nationwide.

With [SATs](#) and [ACTs](#) cancelled, [Advanced Placement](#) tests moved online, and no in-person class time to seek help, students are worried. During a time where students have to make some of the most important decisions of their life, they are faced with more and more obstacles.

Daniella Cottone is a senior at Plainedge whose first and only AP – for computer science – has been restructured and moved online.

“A lot of people depend on getting credit,” Cottone said –herself included. AP tests are designed by the College Board, which also designs the SAT. Special high school course curriculums are based on the AP test for a certain subject, and if a student does well, they can receive college credits for that class. That saves them time and money.

AP tests are usually hours long with multiple choice and essay questions covering a large curriculum. Since schools have moved to remote learning, the College Board created new online tests for most subjects that are only two essay questions and only test part of the curriculum with a 45-minute time limit.

Students like Cottone are worried that since they are no longer taking the same test they were preparing for, they will not receive the score they were hoping for, affecting their ability to receive college credit. However, many agree with Cottone that there is “no other way” to handle the situation.

One is Ryan Lane, an AP biology teacher at Plainedge. “They are making the best effort that they can,” he said about the College Board.

He realizes that many of his students face challenges preparing for the new test, from a lack of resources at home to caring for a sick family member. He hopes many students will take the extra time at home to prepare using resources available such as practice questions he sends or tools the College Board published online. He has been meeting with students in small groups over video calls to teach, but those sessions aren’t mandatory.

Soon after the outbreak of COVID-19 and the resulting school lockdowns around the country, organizations administering the SATs and ACTs cancelled their tests from March through June excluding only the June ACT, but it is expected to also be cancelled since schools are.

For high school juniors, that means choosing to try taking them later or never. The next tests aren't until August. College applications are due as soon as October.

These two tests are designed to reflect how prepared a student is for college, and they're used interchangeably. They're usually considered integral to an application.

"I have to take it soon," said Jacklyn Marando, junior at Plainedge. She missed the sign-up date for the March SAT, planned for May or June, but lost those opportunities. She is worried about getting a seat for August with so many students trying to do the same thing.

"I'm an optimist," said Vishal Arora, executive director at Huntington Learning Center, a local tutoring center in Plainview that offers SAT and ACT test prep. He organized the transition to virtual tutoring using Zoom, so students can continue to prepare. "Students have more time now," he said, explaining that the COVID-19 quarantine provides an opportunity for students to study without being busy with other commitments.

[Many colleges](#) are changing their applications to make the SAT and ACT optional for the class of 2021. Students can submit an application without a score, relying on their GPA and other strengths for acceptance. [Other universities](#) have been test-optional for years.

Bob Schaeffer, an advocate with FairTest, a group calling for university test-optional policies nationwide, says making score submission optional means juniors will have one less thing to stress over. "A good test-optional policy makes it so it doesn't matter," he said regarding submitting scores. Schaeffer said he's seen university test score submission rates drop up to 50% after adopting optional policy.

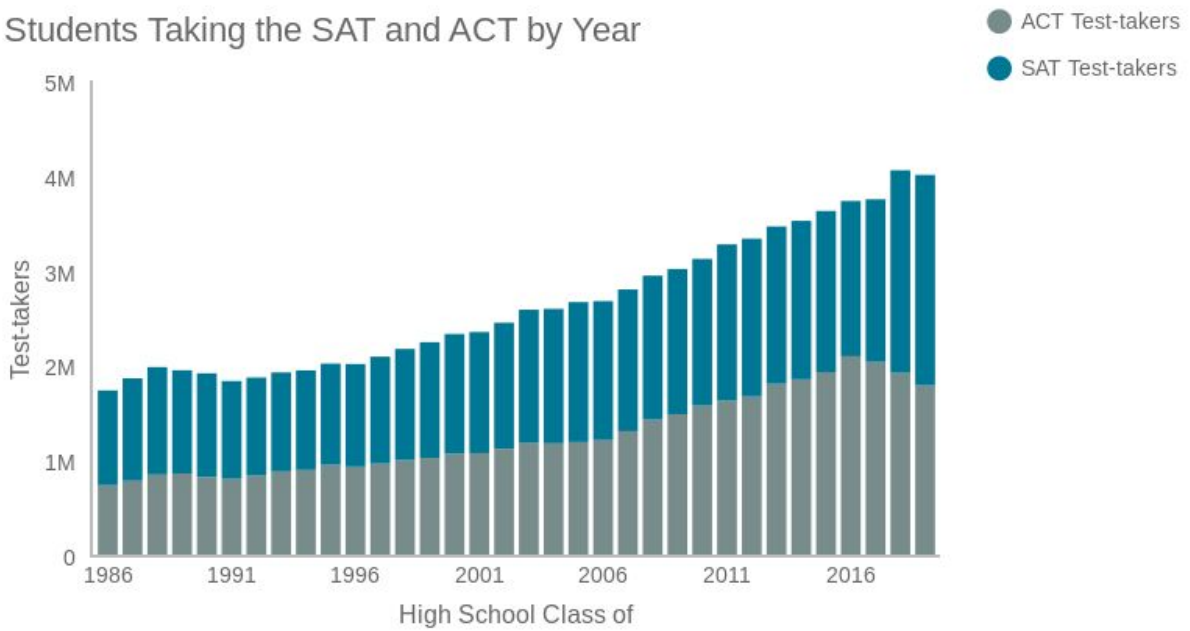
However, Schaeffer acknowledges dropping test requirements is "not a silver bullet." Students will not have the same opportunities to build applications through extracurriculars, and their GPAs may suffer in quarantine.

"Independent learning is hard," said Erin Lehane, an AP chemistry teacher at Plainedge. She said cancelling the tests altogether may be a better option to lessen stress, but understands students want to take them for scholarships or college credit. Because of this, she's been posting review notes online and hosting optional virtual office hours.

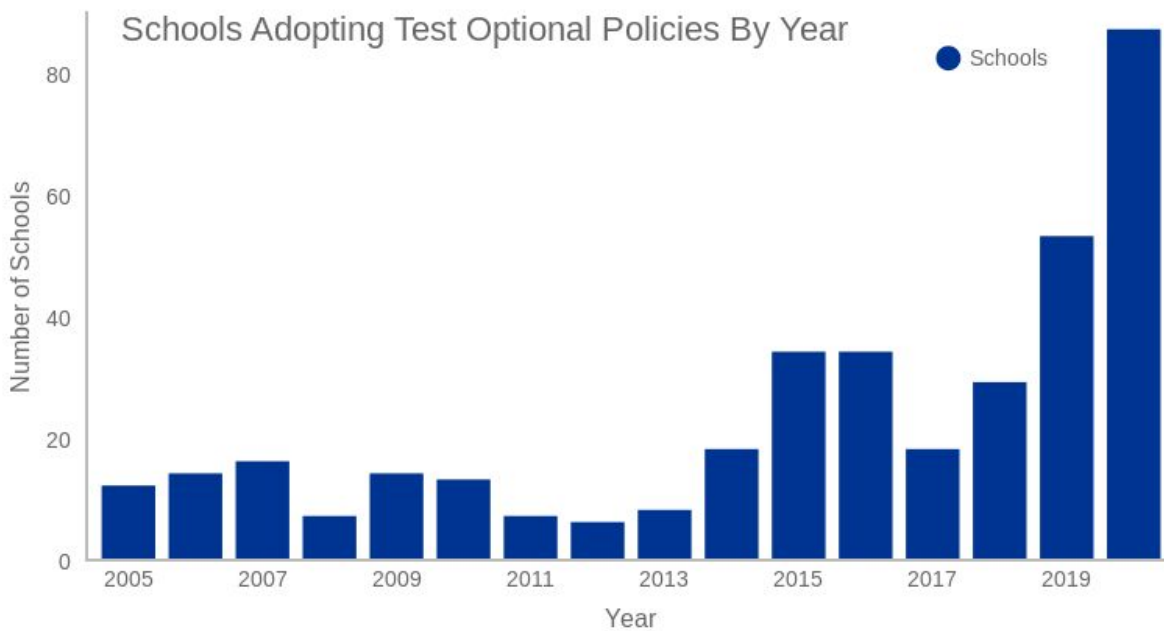
Juliet Ciani, a student at Plainedge, chose to opt-out of her AP tests this year. She understands that the online test is the "best thing under the circumstances," but she doesn't think she'll do well. Her teachers are doing what they can, but she says she needs in-person guidance to succeed academically.

According to emails, the guidance department at Plainedge offers phone meetings for information and offers a [comprehensive online page](#) of useful links for college preparation. They are also organizing a photomontage of students and their college plans to unify students during the COVID-19 crisis.

Students Taking the SAT and ACT by Year



Although schools have been going test-optional since 2005, more students are taking the tests than ever. The ACT only began counting students who took the test with accommodations in 2013. Data is sourced from FairTest.



The graph shows a spike in schools adopting test-optional policies even before the coronavirus pandemic. These policies allow students who have strengths in other areas to apply without a bad score ruling them out of consideration. Data is sourced from FairTest.