

Doubts cast on ACT drills

Study links cramming in class to lower scores

By Carlos Sadovi
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Chicago public high school teachers who use classroom time to drill juniors for the ACT exam are doing more harm than good and instead should focus on strengthening longer-term learning 'in subjects that are on the test, according to a

report to be released Tuesday.

In the study, conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, researchers analyzed test results and surveyed and interviewed teachers and high school juniors in 2005 and 2007. Students typically take the ACT their junior year.

Researchers found that ACT scores were slightly lower in schools where teachers spent at least 40 percent of their time drilling students than in schools where teachers spent less than 20 percent

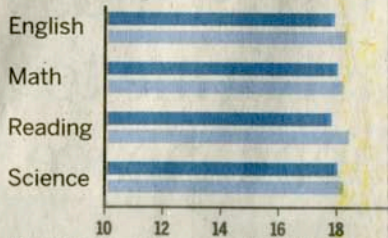
of their class time on similar preparation, said Elaine Allensworth, the report's lead author.

Allensworth, co-director of the consortium, said she was surprised many schools in the Chicago system relied on the test-prep approach because other research has shown that the method does not necessarily translate to higher ACT scores.

The test "requires students to integrate skills across different

AVERAGE ACT SCORE By subject

■ Avg. of 40% class time for prep
■ Avg. of 20% class time for prep



SOURCE: Univ. of Chicago TRIBUNE GRAPHIC

PLEASE SEE **ACT** » PAGE 4

» ACT

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

classes . . . you're only going to get that by working hard in your classes and developing those deep cognitive skills," she said. "It's not the type of test you can cram for."

Chicago Public Schools chief Arne Duncan agreed with the findings, but said that since 2006 the district has stepped up teaching in the core subjects of English, math and science. The effort, dubbed "High School Transformation," will be expanded to 45 of the district's 133 high schools this fall.

Duncan said test prep courses now are made available after school, on weekends and during students' free time. "Test prep should never be a substitute for quality teaching in the classroom," Duncan said.

Stephanie Galvin, a Jones College Prep High School junior who recently took the ACT, said teachers there still are devoting much of their classroom time to test preparation. Learning more math concepts especially would have helped her, she said.

"It's making us robotic: 'This is how you test,'" said Galvin, 17. "As opposed to learning material and new concepts, we're learning how to fill in bubbles."

According to the study, "From High School to the Future: ACT Preparation—Too Much, Too Late," many teachers and students interviewed said they believed there was not a direct correlation between what was being taught in the classrooms and what was being asked on the exam.

Researchers found that while 64 percent of students entering high school in 2002 had met 8th-grade standards on the Illinois State Achievement Tests in reading, only 30 percent met the ACT reading benchmark when they took the college-entrance exam in 2005. Allensworth said this shows a need to focus on core content throughout high school.

"They think it's all about gaming the test and learning test strategies, but in fact it's not at all about test strategies; it's strongly related to doing deep good work in classes," she said. "There's no quick fix; everyone wants a quick fix, but it's not there."

Although the study focused on test prep in classrooms in 2005 and 2007, it found a slight increase in test scores for students who took after-school test-preparation courses offered by private companies.

Allensworth said the difference could be that the students who took outside courses were more motivated.

In 2001 the state required all 11th graders to take the ACT. Average composite scores statewide have remained relatively flat, inching up only about a third of a percentage point to a 20.3 average score from 2003 to 2007. Chicago schools' average score increased nearly 1 percentage point—to 17.6—over the same three-year period.

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