

More Than Just a Score: Meaningful Test Prep

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Time Frame 45–60 minutes

Essential Question(s)

What are the goals of test prep?

Summary

Test prep often becomes a "one and done" technique for preparing students for standardized tests or college entrance exams. However, this technique has only a small impact on students. In this session, teachers will explore test prep strategies that can be embedded into the curriculum in a more meaningful way. Teachers will apply modeled strategies to their own content and reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches.

Learning Goals

- Participants will determine the effectiveness of traditional test prep strategies.
- Participants will make connections between effective test preparation and authentic teaching practices.

Attachments

- ACT Test Prep—More Than Just a Score.pdf
- Always Sometimes Never True Poster—More Than Just a Score.docx
- Always Sometimes Never True Poster—More Than Just a Score.pdf
- Always Sometimes or Never True Statements—More Than Just a Score.docx
- Always Sometimes or Never True Statements—More Than Just a Score.pdf
- Authentic Learning and Teaching—More Than Just a Score.pdf
- Inside Out Template—More Than Just a Score.docx
- Inside Out Template—More Than Just a Score.pdf
- Instructional Strategy Note Sheet—More Than Just a Score.docx
- Instructional Strategy Note Sheet—More Than Just a Score.pdf
- Meaningful Test Prep—More Than Just a Score.docx
- Meaningful Test Prep—More Than Just a Score.pdf
- Presentation Slides—More Than Just a Score.pdf
- Presentation Slides—More Than Just a Score.pptx

Materials

- More Than Just a Score PowerPoint slides
- Inside Out Template
- ACT Test Prep: More is Not Better (laminate if possible)
- Instructional Strategy Note Sheet
- Always, Sometimes, or Never True Statements
- Always, Sometimes, or Never True Poster (printed on 11" x 17")
- Authentic Learning and Teaching Rubric
- Small Post-it Notes (2x2 or 3x3)
- Vis-a-Vis Pens (optional, for writing on laminated research data)

Engage

Presenter's Note

Make handouts and materials available on the table for participants. All participants should receive a copy of "Authentic Learning and Teaching Rubric," "Instructional Strategy Note Sheet," "Inside Out Template," "Always, Sometimes, or Never True Statements," and “Meaningful Test Prep.”

With **slide 2** displayed, introduce yourself and briefly mention the "Instructional Strategy Note Sheet." Display **slide 3** and briefly discuss the essential question, then transition to **slide 4** and inform participants that new instructional strategies will be introduced to them throughout the session. These strategies are tools to support higher-order thinking in authentic ways. Encourage participants to use their "Instructional Strategy Note Sheet" to jot down ideas for how they would personalize the strategies for their classes. The presentation will allow participants time to reflect on the strategies presented.

Change to **slide 5** and inform participants that they are going to complete an activity using the handout on the table titled, "Always, Sometimes, or Never True." Inform participants that the Always, Sometimes, or Never True instructional strategy helps students evaluate statements based on how often they think they are true. Tell participants that they will read the following statements about test prep practices and individually mark if they believe the statements to be always true, sometimes true, or never true.

After a minute, have participants share out what they marked. Use the "Always, Sometimes, or Never Poster" and the small Post-it notes to mark how many participants marked always, sometimes, and never. This visual will provide participants with an idea of where the majority of the group is in terms of viewpoints.

Lead a short discussion about some of these results. You can ask some of the following questions to facilitate discussions:

- Are there any numbers that are surprising to you, and if so, why?
- Which numbers have the most disagreement or variation?
- Does anyone want to share why they marked (always, sometimes, or never) on number (one, two, three, four, or five)?

Possible Responses

- I marked always on number one because graphs and tables are highly important in math and science. If you can't interpret the graph or table, you may not be able to answer the question.
- I said always on number two because practice tests allow students to see the types of questions that will be asked on a test. It allows them to see the use of language and the content that might be covered on the test.
- For reviewing practice problems, I marked sometimes because seeing practice problems is beneficial, but sometimes students become disengaged and tune out during the practice.
- Cram sessions are never beneficial because by the time they are cramming information, they won't retain it, and if they haven't learned it yet, they won't learn it during the cram session.

Presenter's Note For Number Three

Some things to think about (and questions to possibly pose to the whole group):

- What if you are given content practice problems that you have no background knowledge on or that there is no context to?
- How do you help students when you can't explain the difference between the correct answer and another answer that may at first appear correct?
- Is this effective test prep for students? If not, what could we do to help make it effective?

After the discussion, shift participants' attention to **slide 6** and briefly highlight the objectives for the session. This will provide a road map of where you will go together during the session and will let participants know what to expect from the session.

Explore

Transition to **slide 7** and identify the handout on the table titled "Inside Out." Inform the participants that the Inside Out instructional strategy helps students arrange, organize, and connect prior knowledge to new information as they explore a topic. The graphic organizer consists of three circles inside one another, like the graphic organizers on the "Inside Out" handout and slide. By the end of the activity, each circle will contain a different kind of knowledge as newer information is depicted visually as building out from the student's own prior knowledge.

After the brief introduction to the strategy, tell participants, "You will have one minute to write down the test prep practices you use with students in the circle labeled 'Individual'."

Presenter's Note

Make sure you watch a clock or set a timer for the minutes mentioned on the slides. It goes quickly, and this is meant to be a quick activity to recall, share, and analyze information.

After one minute passes, move to **slide 8** and instruct participants to find a partner. They will be using the next three minutes to share the individual practices they wrote down with one another.

Each participant will write in the 'Peer' circle the new ideas that they did not previously list in their 'Individual' circle. Partners may also note the practices they both originally wrote.

After three minutes, switch to **slide 9** and instruct participants to locate the research on the table titled "ACT Test Prep—More is not Better." Participants will have five minutes to read through the research by the University of Chicago and may use a Vis-a-Vis pen to highlight any important or new information. In the circle labeled 'Text,' participants will write down what this research and data says about effective test prep practices.

Presenter's Note

Research must be laminated in order for the Vis-a-Vis pens to be used. Otherwise, don't allow participants to write on the research.

Explain

After five minutes have passed, give participants an opportunity to share out what they wrote down in the largest circle.

Shift to **slide 10** and read the quote from the research: "A challenging academic atmosphere and a class curriculum that teaches critical thinking gives students the best shot at succeeding on the ACT."

Ask participants, "What are the goals for test preparation?" If participants are not sure how to respond, probe deeper and ask, "Does it depend on the type of test or goal? For example, general tests, other standardized tests, college or career readiness, or lifelong citizenship—do these require different practices to prepare students?"

Allow participants a moment to think and share out ideas and practices.

Extend

Wrap up discussions about effective test prep practices and the research that supports them by transitioning to **slide 11**, "Authentic Teaching." Ask participants, "Which instructional practices from the text promote authentic instruction and how do they promote it?" Participants may use the handout on the table titled "Authentic Learning and Teaching" to help them connect these practices with authentic instruction.

Allow them a moment to reflect and then report out to the whole group.

Possible Responses

- Authentic instruction promotes the proper practices for effective test prep because authentic teaching leads students to critically analyze, evaluate, and defend multiple points of view.
- Through authentic learning, students make connections between real-world application and core content.
- Students are actively engaged in conversation with peers, defending their knowledge and using prior knowledge to support the construction of new knowledge.

Evaluate

Change to **slide 12** and ask participants to revisit the handout "Always, Sometimes or Never True Statements"

Say, "Now that we have read and discussed what research says about effective test prep practices, look at these statements again. Based on what the research says, has your stance stayed the same or has it changed?"

Have participants focus on numbers two, three, and five for this discussion. If participants have changed their stances, ask them to share out how they have changed. If some participants have not changed their opinion, ask them to share why as well.

Possible Responses

- Number two, taking a practice ACT test is not an effective practice because they are not designed for learning. They don't teach the student anything about the content, and ACT requires students to interpret, analyze, and pay attention to detailed data and information.
- Number three, reviewing practice problems is similar to number two because when reviewing problems, students are not required to use any higher-order thinking skills. They are not connecting the questions and answers to anything meaningful.
- Number five, writing papers defending a point of view is a great strategy that will always work as an effective test prep strategy because when writing this kind of paper, students are required to think critically and analyze and interpret data/information.

Teacher's Note

Be sure to highlight that this instructional strategy can be used in multiple ways during instruction. Students examine a set of statements, reflect on their individual interpretations of each, and decide if they are always, sometimes, or never true. This strategy can be used in a variety of ways, both at the beginning of a learning cycle to elicit prior knowledge or after participants have had opportunities to learn about a topic, to check for understanding.

When wrapping up the session, display **slide 13** and instruct participants to reflect on how the instructional strategies modeled today relate to the topic of the professional development session. Participants may also complete their "Instructional Strategy Note Sheet."

Lastly, display **slide 14** and show participants the test prep resources mentioned in the session.

Follow-up Activities

Research Rationale

The ACT is a bridge that students who want to attend certain colleges must know how to navigate. Colleges have set requirements, and students must achieve certain composite scores on the ACT to be admitted into certain schools (Grove, 2016). Teachers often focus on test-taking strategies instead of the knowledge and content that will be tested. Low-level tasks are assigned to students during these test prep sessions; higher-order thinking is not activated in activities such as determining the best answer choice, taking practice tests, and completing practice problems. Spending time on practice tests and working on testing strategies was shown to have little to no impact on improving student test scores (Briggs, 2001, 2009; Powers & Rock 1999). Traditional test preparation strategies are not the best way a student can prepare, so understanding test strategies that work is important for teachers and students. Test prep should include and integrate training in course curriculum, the use of engaging strategies to inspire and guide students in active participation, and deconstructing students' misconceptions about the ACT (K20 Center, 2015). Kalchman (2011) and his research team discovered that 76% of students considerably increased their standardized testing scores from fall to spring when they were regularly practicing problem solving and explaining life experiences through content learning.

Resources

- Allensworth, E., Correa, M., and Ponisciak, S. (2008). *From high school to the future: ACT preparation—too much, too late*. University of Chicago: Consortium on School Research. https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/high-school-future-act-preparation-too-much-too-late
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- Kalchman, M. (2011). Using the math in everyday life to improve student learning. *Middle School Journal*, *43*(1), 24–31.
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