

PSAT Testing: Blunder Causes Staffing Reassignment

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Abstract

This case exemplifies the effects of high stakes standardized testing and accountability on education and school district personnel. The case focuses on a school counselor who inadvertently gave the students the actual PSAT (a preliminary college entrance exam) instead of a practice test during a college preparatory workshop. The error caused the counselor to be placed on paid administrative leave pending an investigation. The counselor was later reassigned to another high school.

Keywords: PSAT testing, test security and integrity, ethics, reassignment



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CASE NARRATIVE INTRODUCTION

On Saturday, September 11, 2010 at a local high school located in a small town in south Texas, several students were given the 2010 Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test during a college preparatory workshop, under the assumption that the test being administered was a practice test. When test administrators were grading the exam, they noticed that the answer key did not match answers on the exam. Although this initially seemed like a minor mistake confined to the actual campus administering the test, the magnitude of the blunder posed a national threat to the integrity of the test and possible invalidation of tests nationwide.

SAT/NATIONAL MERIT SCHOLARSHIP QUALIFYING TEST

The Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT/NMSQT) is a standardized paper and pencil test that is supported by the College Board and National Merit Scholarship Corporation. This exam will better prepare students by providing them practice for the actual test as well as provide immediate and direct feedback. It will give students the sense of sitting for the real exam. The SAT was created by the College Board to standardize college entrance exams and to help colleges and universities identify students who could succeed at their institutions and to connect students with educational opportunities beyond high school. Another benefit is that it provides students an opportunity to enter NMSC scholarship programs and gain access to college and career planning tools. The PSAT/NMSQT measures several analytical skills: reading, math problem-solving, and writing. Administrators and school counselors persuade students to take the exam because it provides several benefits, specifically:

- Provides feedback on the individual strengths and weaknesses regarding study skills associated with college readiness. (Students can then be prescriptive in their preparation for those skills needing to be strengthened.)
- It allows the students to gauge their performance with other students taking the exam and applying to college.
- Each student taking the exam is submitted to the National Merit Scholarship Corporation for scholarships opportunities (grade 11).
- It also formally prepares the students for the actual SAT. Students become familiar with the kinds of questions and the exact directions they will see on the SAT.
- Students receive information from colleges if they check "yes" to the Student Search Service.

The PSAT/NMSQT test is divided into five sections: two 25-minute critical reading sections, two 25-minute math sections and one 30-minute writing skills section. The entire exam takes approximately two hours and 10 minutes. One section of the test, the critical reading portion, is made up of 48 questions. This includes 13 sentence completions and 35 critical reading questions. The math section includes 39 questions and is made up of 28 multiple choice math questions and 10 student produced responses. The final portion of the test is the writing skills test which includes 39 questions made up of 14 identifying sentence errors, 20 improving sentences and 5 improving paragraph questions.

An important benefit of the PSAT/NMSQT test is that students scoring high enough, may qualify to enter the competitions for prestigious scholarships and participate in recognition programs. Eleventh grade students enter the National Merit Scholarship Corporation (NMSC) competitions

by taking the PSAT/NMSQT, which provides an initial screening of approximately 1.5 million students each year, and by meeting published program entry and/or participation requirements. NMSC then uses the Selection Index score, which is the sum of the critical reading, mathematics, and writing skills scores on the PSAT/NMSQT and will provide a preliminary list of students who will be recognized as exemplary scholars.

SATURDAY COLLEGE PREPARATORY WORKSHOP

On Saturday, September 11, 2010, a school counselor administered what she thought to be a practice exam for the upcoming SAT exam. Approximately 150 students took the exam. The exam was graded and then returned to the students in order to practice for their upcoming test. Students believing they were in possession of a PSAT practice packet took the test home. Students began to argue with the test administrators that their papers were graded incorrectly. A few days later, it was discovered that the actual PSAT had been administered to the students and this is why the answer key did not match the test. The school district officials notified the Educational Testing Center (ETS) about the “administrative error.” (ETS is the company contracted by the College School Board to provide, administer and score the standardized exam, which gives students firsthand practice for the SAT as well as an opportunity to qualify for scholarships.) The school district quickly launched an in-house investigation and the counselor was placed on paid administrative leave pending the outcome of the investigation. Attorneys for both parties were involved in a fact finding mission and controversial issue with serious repercussions.

INVESTIGATION

The investigation was conducted by school officials with the assistance of the school district’s Human Resources Office and school attorney. At the high school, standardized tests are locked in a secure area with the strictest security measures. It was the assumption that only the campus testing coordinator possessed a key to the closet that was the repository for all secure materials. As an additional security measure, all test packets are shrink-wrapped by the College Board with warning labels attached. In this case, the PSAT/NMSQT test was shrink- wrapped with a label stating “DO NOT OPEN UNTIL OCTOBER 13.”

As with any colossal mistake, the district bureaucracy was simultaneously concerned with the accountability or assignment of blame, in addition to solving the problem. Those involved with the mistake knew of the serious repercussions. As in every investigation, there are several layers that need to be peeled back in order to ascertain how an error of this magnitude could have occurred. There was much finger pointing occurring at the campus and both the counselor and testing coordinator were interviewed and questioned at length.. The testing coordinator quickly acknowledged that she was not even in town when this incident occurred. The PSAT testing packets were stored in the closet where other secure testing materials i.e. TAKS tests are usually stored. This begged the question, “If only the testing coordinator, who was out of town, is responsible for the contents of this room, who unlocked the closet for the counselor?” In addition, why did the counselor not adhere to the warning labels on the packets?

RAMIFICATIONS

Although the testing error appears to be an innocent mistake, the ramifications of such a blunder can literally affect the test integrity worldwide. Once a standardized test has been compromised, it can no longer be used. The invalidation of the test would force the College Board to issue alternate versions of the exams at a cost of millions of dollars.

This mistake also placed the district in an embarrassing quandary. After it was reported to the College Board, a parallel and comprehensive investigation was also taking place by officials of the Educational Testing Center in order to determine whether test items had been leaked locally, or far worse, on the internet. Students were asked to return their “practice packets” in exchange for “better practice packets”. Most of them were recovered, and it was determined that testing information had not been leaked via the internet, thus avoiding ramification of a national and significant magnitude. The College Board served the district notice that their students would no longer be able to take the October exam thus disallowing students an opportunity for scholarship monies. School district officials, not wanting to accept the College Board’s verdict, enlisted help from their attorneys, and after much deliberation, were finally allowed to have their students participate in the scheduled exam.

This incident resulted in College Board and ETS representatives assuming responsibility for the on-site administration of the PSAT for the next two years. For the October 13, 2010 administration, an alternate exam was administered to the students of Laredo. Approximately 900 Laredo students were required to take a different version of the test.

CONCLUSION

After several months of both an external investigation by ETS and internal investigation by school district officials, it was determined that “no evidence supported the notion that students ever realized they had an actual test” that was intended for the October 13, 2010 SAT administration. The school district Superintendent along with the Associate Superintendent of Human Resources also decided that although this error was unintentional, they felt that “in the best interest of the students,” it would be prudent to reassign the counselor to another high school.

TEACHING NOTES

This case was developed for the use with graduate students pursuing administrative credentials in educational leadership. Within this field, many students will eventually become school administrators and supervise teachers and other administrative staff. The accountability of both testing security and integrity must be considered when administering standardized tests. The case focuses on a school counselor who inadvertently gave the students the actual PSAT (a preliminary college entrance exam) instead of a practice test during a college preparatory workshop. The error caused the counselor to be placed on paid administrative leave pending an investigation. The counselor was later reassigned to another high school.

1. This case invites teachers and educational leaders to think about fundamental issues surrounding standardized testing as it relates to security, integrity and confidentiality. With today's high stakes testing and the numerous tests that are administered at the campus level, it is prudent that future administrators be knowledgeable in the area of testing procedures.
2. Every educator is required to adhere to the Employee Standards of Conduct. As stated in board policy, all employees shall perform their duties in accordance to State and Federal law, District policy and Ethical Standards.
3. Educators administering standardized tests such as the TAKS are required to sign an Oath of test Security and Confidentiality acknowledging that they will adhere to all outlined test procedures. In the case of administering the PSAT, there is no official oath but there is training associated with the administration of the exam and test integrity is communicated and understood.
4. Investigations conducted by the district must follow specific guidelines in an effort to determine factual information and arrive at a fair and reasonable course of action that does not impede on an employee's due process.
5. Failure to comply with any investigation can constitute insubordination and grounds for disciplinary action, up to and including termination.
6. During an investigation, it is not unusual for a school district to place an educator on paid administrative leave pending the investigation when there are allegations of wrongdoing. This is done to protect the employee and maintain the integrity of the investigation.
7. Most Texas teacher and administrator contracts contain a clause to the effect that the employee may be reassigned at the discretion of the superintendent.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Standardized testing requires meticulous planning and has been in the forefront of school district priorities when it comes to the administration and integrity of the testing conditions. What precautionary measures can be taken when administering a high stakes test such as the PSAT or SAT?
2. Unfortunately, school administrators are often faced with allegations amidst wrongdoings by school staff member and must conduct investigations to resolve the issue. When dealing with allegations of test security, what steps should be taken to ensure that you have collected all the facts?
3. If the school counselor is found to be in violation of her testing oath, what disciplinary actions should be taken? Are there any gray areas that would affect the outcome?
4. With both an external and internal investigation, who takes the lead, ETS (College Board) or the school district?
5. As a future administrator, do you feel that placing the counselor on paid administrative leave was necessary? Why or Why not?
6. What effect does high stakes testing accountability have on schools, administrators, teachers, and students? How will high stakes testing affect you as a future principal? What is your overall philosophy of accountability? Is the primary problem presented in the case study legal, ethical, moral or educational? Explain fully.

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Bio

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