

Road to College: Student Shows Improving Standardized Test Scores Takes Practice, Not Money

BY CARMEN CUSIDO

Standardized test scores matter — higher test scores greatly increase a student's chances of getting into better, more competitive schools, resulting in more choices for scholarships and financial aid. While teens may get discouraged from re-taking standardized tests if their initial scores are low, the good news is that practice and the use of free online sample prep and testing can make all the difference.

Just ask Jazmin Regalado of New Mexico.

Regalado, 17, is a rising high school senior at Fort Sumner High School, she'll be the first from her mother's side of the family to attend and finish college. Regalado wasn't satisfied with her initial PSAT score (the Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT/NMSQT) test administered by the College Board). She tested in the "red" range: meaning she needed to build her reading and math skills.



Jazmin Regalado, who will be entering her senior year of high school in New Mexico, pictured with her grandmother, Belen Hernandez. Photo credit: Jazmin Regalado
Instead of becoming discouraged, she sought the advice of a school counselor who told her to sign on to [Khan Academy](#) for free online tutorials.

"I logged on to the Khan Academy account at least an hour a day — there were some days I'd study for more than an hour," Regalado said. "I'd look for specific videos for PSAT and SAT practice. I love the way they explain things in the videos. They give you sample problems and then you solve them."

By the time she took the test again this past spring, her score had increased 101 points. Her SAT score also jumped 120 points when she took it in June.

Over 4.24 million high school students took either the PSAT/NMSQT or PSAT 10 in the 2015-16 school year: this is about over half of all U.S. sophomores and almost half of all U.S. juniors. Of those students, 25 percent described themselves as Hispanic, said José Rios, College Board spokesman.

Latinos make up more than one-in-five of the 1.7 million class of 2016 students who took the SAT, Ríos said.

According to [data](#) from the College Board and Khan Academy released this summer, 20 hours of personalized official SAT Practice on Khan Academy led to a gain of 115 points on the redesigned exam. Since its launch two years ago, more than 3.7 million students have used this online tool.

High scores on standardized tests are pivotal in helping Latino youth in particular be eligible for certain scholarships, said Shirley Acevedo Buontempo, executive director of [Latino U College Access](#). She founded the White Plains, New York-based nonprofit in 2012 to increase college enrollment of first-generation Latino students through workshops and college coaching programs.

Acevedo Buontempo stresses that prepping for standardized tests does not have to be costly.

“Many Latino youth cannot afford to take formal test prep. We offer an eight-week class for the ACTs and the SATs,” Acevedo Buontempo said. “Better scores open doors to higher-level institutions and allows many students to apply for private scholarships as well. ... Some of our students have seen 250 to 300-point increases on their SAT scores just by taking a test-prep class.”

Acevedo Buontempo gave an example of a Latino U scholar who practiced and was determined to do well; he scored 2100 on the SAT and was accepted to five Ivy League schools. He’s set to graduate from Princeton University next May, she said.

Jazmin plays several sports at Fort Sumner High School in New Mexico. Photo credit: Jazmin Regalado

Back in New Mexico, Regalado, an aspiring medical student, knew that improving her standardized test scores would make her eligible for more scholarships once she begins applying to colleges this fall.

“I don’t want my parents to spend all their money on me to go to school and I don’t want to have too much debt in student loans,” she said; Regalado also has two younger siblings who will be going through the college process.

Regalado, an athlete and National Honor Society member, says she wants to be a doctor to help people, and dreams of applying to Texas Tech University and the University of New Mexico, which offers a combined bachelor’s and medical degree.

She is increasing her chances by her high school record; Regalado has maintained straight As and is enrolled in honors classes, taking at least a couple of online courses where she gets some college credit.

Enrolling in harder classes and regular test prep paid off. “She took extra time to make sure her vocabulary was developing and that she was learning to write persuasively — it impressed me,” said Pam Richards, Regalado’s sophomore-year English teacher and former guidance counselor.

Regalado’s parents have stressed the importance of education from an early age; her mother didn’t finish high school because she had to take care of family in Mexico and her father works as a horse trainer. But their daughter has harnessed the resources around her and is doing what her parents were not able to do; pursue higher education.

Regalado's mother, Laura Regalado de Sprissler, said she is proud of her "hard-working and intelligent" oldest child, adding that she's a positive influence on her two younger siblings.

"She's always been this way —when she first came to this country and started Kindergarten, she learned English in a month."