



## Transcript of episode 61, Preparing for the ACT & SAT

**Emily Kircher-Morris:** [00:00:31] Hey everyone, welcome to episode 61. I'm Emily Kircher-Morris, and today we're going to be talking about how to help our older gifted and twice-exceptional kids with standardized tests, specifically the ACT and SAT, and how to handle the impact they have on college admissions.

Standardized tests are definitely a controversial topic, and we'll address those concerns with our guests. We'll also talk about how to help kids do their best given the current format and expectations they have, along with some ideas and resources that everyone can access, like the podcast that our guests host.

Before we jump into the conversation, I just want to do a quick check-in and see how everyone's doing. 2020 has been a wild ride so far, and we're only really about halfway through. So I'm curious, what have you learned about yourself and the neurodiverse people in your life? How have you been changed? We'd love for you to join our conversation in our Facebook group. It's the Mind Matters Gifted Ed and Advocacy Group. You can also follow our Facebook and Instagram pages. Those are Mind Matters Podcast and our Twitter handle is @mindmatterspod. Joining us today...

**Mike Bergin:** [00:01:47] I'm Mike Bergin, president of Chariot Learning based out of Rochester, New York, working with students on SAT and ACT prep, academic coaching, and subject tutoring.

**Amy Seeley:** [00:01:56] I'm Amy Seeley from Cleveland, Ohio, and Seeley Test Pros. We work for students from eighth grade to grad school on all kinds of standardized tests and all kinds of learning differences.

**Emily Kircher-Morris:** [00:02:05] Our conversation is up next.

(break)

Today we're excited to have Mike Bergin and Amy Seeley. They are the hosts of a podcast called Tests and the Rest, and we're going to be talking about testing. What our kids have to go through to gauge the qualifications for college and what it takes to prepare for those tests. So first, tell me about yourselves. Amy?

**Amy Seeley:** [00:02:31] I have worked with students for over 26 years doing test preparation. And, you know, in the field of test preparation, you work with students of all

levels of ability. Um, interestingly, I don't necessarily look at students in terms of, kind of what, you know, learning differences they may have. I just look at each student as sort of where are you at and how can we maximize your performances?

So in each situation, working with students individually, it's really about trying to figure out what that student's needs are. And if there are any type of learning differences, what can we do? You know, what can I do as a test prep provider to accommodate that in our tutoring sessions or to plan for that when the student's going to take the test.

**Mike Bergin:** [00:03:14] Like Amy, I've also been into the test prep industry for 26 plus years, and I've worked at all different levels of the industry and at Kaplan as part of kind of retail prep and then at Huntington learning center. And as I've progressed through the industry and worked with students in so many different modalities, I've found that like Amy, I really value the opportunity to engage with students individually so that every aspect of who they are and whether they take tests regular time or have accommodations, wherever they fall on the percentile scale or the bell curve, they get to focus on what they're capable of, working within their own capacities to achieve their best results. So we have worked with so many students who have accommodations learning disabilities, gifted students, and everybody is a little bit different and special.

**Emily Kircher-Morris:** [00:04:17] So recently some colleges in California have decided that they're moving away from considering testing scores for qualification. And I know that some of the Ivy league and other universities are doing the same. What are your thoughts about that choice and where that leaves our kids who learn differently?

**Mike Bergin:** [00:04:37] It's an interesting idea to remove one aspect of the application because whatever you take from the application process, means that you look at all the other components of the application more deeply, there's less room for latitude there. And you may not be engaging with a candidate at the point where he or she really excels. It's like the essay. You know, if the essay is optional and students can apply without writing an essay, then all the great writers in the pool are disadvantaged. So we encounter a lot of students, um, with, with learning disabilities who find that their ability to excel on the SAT and ACT helps schools understand what they're really capable of and puts their grades in context, especially when they've had academic challenges because of the way they learn.

**Amy Seeley:** [00:05:36] I heard a really great analogy and it was about the application really being like a cookie jar. And when a student sends their application with all that information they're going to include, think about all those components, whether it be essay, test scores, GPA, extracurriculars, as being cookies that go in that jar.

And what you want to keep in mind about the application process is that if you're not going to put certain cookies in there, you need to make sure that the other cookies are large enough to fill the space. And so I think that's a great way of looking at the application process. It's it's not necessarily what you're putting in there, but you have to be careful that if you're removing something, you're going to have to supplement it with something that might be much larger.

**Emily Kircher-Morris:** [00:06:19] I know one of the criticisms that I often hear from an equity standpoint, that it's not an even playing field. And I feel like sometimes I can understand that and empathize with that, but I also feel a lot of times that when you remove this, in some ways, standardized testing actually equalizes the playing field in a lot of ways, with the exception of the people who are paying for other children to go take their test and breaking the law. You know, it's like ultimately a kid who goes to an elite private school and scores the same as somebody who maybe hasn't had those same opportunities, you know, you can look at that within that context when you're doing the application. And if you're worried that people are going to game the system, taking away the test doesn't change that. They're still going to find a way to just game the new system.

**Mike Bergin:** [00:07:00] Well you're exactly right, Emily. And imagine this: the test that's designed to be the most standardized assessment to rank students on certain, uh, certain skills across the entire country should be seen as the most level playing field.

I don't think anybody believes that a student's grades in school come without extra help or tutoring when they, when that's required. So of course, if a student prepares for a test, that's what colleges are looking for anyway. And there's, there are more sources of free test prep available than ever before, but every aspect of the application requires support, requires structure, and does not allow for an even playing field. There's no aspect of a student's life which is not tilted in one way or another based on their access to resources.

**Amy Seeley:** [00:08:00] And I think that's, what's interesting too, if you consider a student who let's say as a student athlete, that student may be putting resources and time towards that pursuit, and they may be excelling in that, and yet another student, you know, doesn't have the time doesn't have the resources and is not as good of an athlete because they didn't get provided with those opportunities. And yet the athlete may gain some advantage in the admissions process. So I think it's, it's all about different skills, different abilities.

And, you know, in some cases, students will demonstrate that in different areas. By removing, let's say tests from the equation, then I think we limit, in some students' cases, their ability to demonstrate how they are performing in that sort of standardized level playing field.

**Emily Kircher-Morris:** [00:08:41] It's a complicated issue and I understand the need for looking at things critically and figuring out what's going to be best, but sometimes it's like the whole "throwing the baby out with the bath water." It's like, let's figure out better ways to use the tools that we have rather than just getting rid of the tools altogether.

**Amy Seeley:** [00:08:55] The interesting thing about equity though, is that it's not as if you can't look at it in the context. Right? So for example, if I want to be equitable, let's say for underserved populations for example, an admissions person is going to know that exists in reading an application. I mean, there are certain things that are going to be obvious that if then maybe they want to switch the lens, you know? So for example, if I'm looking at an application for a student who may have had some learning differences, I'm going to hopefully switch the lens to look at that student and what kind of obstacles they may have overcome.

So it's sort of like, I think in terms of equity, you know, in different populations, Admissions counselors have the ability to switch the lens when they need to. It's just that if we remove this whole piece that really skews what, where that lens can look because it removes something for some students.

**Mike Bergin:** [00:09:49] To Amy's point, there are certain applicants who have always been test optional. I mean, and that's the, that colleges in the admissions office have priorities. They, they see the kind of campus they want. They know which students they're hoping will bring different perspectives and abilities and skills to the party almost literally. So they can always revise certain scores, downwards. They can revise them upwards. When you look at the average test scores for a given school that mid 50 means that 25% of students come in with test scores lower than the lowest part of that range, and 25% come with scores higher. And it just means that there's always been an option.

But when we were talking about equity, and I know that takes us off the path of what we really came together to discuss, the UC Regents put together a task force and they looked to see if test scores actually disadvantaged students from different populations and they found the opposite. They found that in some cases, the test scores actually were, uh, better and more predictive of their success.

**Emily Kircher-Morris:** [00:10:59] You know, I kind of wanted to start off with that because I think that's an important context as we jump into this, because I know that's one of the criticisms. Kind of looking at it from the point of view of, of gifted students, what are some of the, the traps that you find, um, that parents and students fall into when it comes to taking tests like the SAT and the ACT.

**Mike Bergin:** [00:11:21] So it's a really interesting trap that gifted students fall into in school that their talent, their innate ability, or whatever skills they picked up, they're probably avid readers at a certain point, they process very quickly, they retain information in such a way that they don't really have to work hard. And a lot of gifted students become very bored in school. And because they don't encounter a lot of challenges at grade level, they sometimes don't develop the ability to work hard when natural talent and ability isn't enough.

And the SAT and ACT are tests that encompass the outcomes of students all across the country. So the, the student who's used to being the smartest in her class, or even her school, has now jumped to the national playing field, and that can be really shocking. Sometimes they just so surprised because they have a vision of themselves as 99th percentile students, and the test scores don't reflect that because they really they've never played against that level of competition.

**Amy Seeley:** [00:12:38] And it is interesting too, I always say, you know, to be smart, if you will, if you want to use that kind of generic term, you know, what does that mean? And so for example, somebody will comment, "well, my, my student is a really good writer." And it's like, you can be a good writer, but this test isn't going to have you write, this test is going to have you do more editing. So for example, you could be an excellent writer and let's say you don't write using colons or semi-colons. Well, that's going to create somewhat of a challenge

on the test because you have to specifically know those rules and know how to apply them, or have some sort of have facility with them.

So at a certain point, you know, u"m, you can be gifted and you can know a lot, but it could, the, the test itself could shine a light on areas where like, "Oh, I need to review that, or I need to remind myself of what did I learn about that, like in fifth or sixth grade or something like that." And like Mike, to Mike's point, if, if learning has always been easy, it's sometimes realizing, oh no, you're going to have to seek out this information or increase your knowledge or retention so that you can do well on the test with that information.

**Emily Kircher-Morris:** [00:13:44] When you're working with kids who are very bright, is there a different angle that you take when you're working with them to help them get ready for these types of tests?

**Mike Bergin:** [00:13:54] Absolutely. So when we say very bright, I'm going to assume that we're kind of conflating with that higher baseline of content knowledge.

**Emily Kircher-Morris:** [00:14:04] Yes. High cognitive ability.

**Amy Seeley:** [00:14:06] Right.

**Mike Bergin:** [00:14:06] Yeah. Yeah. And they're, they're already great readers. They already have a facility with English language. They already have strong conceptual math understanding and are likely on an advanced track. And the best way to look at how you might approach a gifted student is the way you would approach a star athlete. And if you look at test prep through the lens of sports or art, then you realize that the more promising you are, the higher your potential, the more coaching you do, not the less, you know, very often parents come in and say, well, my son already has A's so he probably only needs a little bit of work. But no parent of a promising musician says, well, my son is already a great guitar player, so he probably doesn't need a lot of rehearsal.

You know, that it's that if you want to excel and you want to continue to push, then you focus more on practice and coaching, and pushing the border of how high you can achieve.

**Amy Seeley:** [00:15:11] It is interesting with the higher scores like that. Um, it's that, it's the refinement, you know, I had a session with a student yesterday who only missed seven questions in an entire test. And you think to yourself, wow, how are you going to fill the hour with that student? But believe it or not, it took us a full hour because each of those questions, we were talking about, you know, and digging into what she picked, why she picked, how she should have thought about it. And so it is interesting because sometimes with those kinds of students, your conversations actually about the errors can be much deeper because they sort of grasp like everything about the conversation, and it, it helps them to become better when they go out and let's say, try doing another test.

**Emily Kircher-Morris:** [00:16:00] I think a lot of times there's also an assumption that kids who are gifted are going to automatically get excellent test scores. Do you see that or is that not necessarily the case?

**Amy Seeley:** [00:16:11] I think when you get to 11th or 12th grade, which is typically when Mike or I would see most of our students, I don't generally have any parent identify the student as gifted to me when they contact me. Now, it usually would speak for itself because those students might be enrolled in more honors programs, more AP or IB programs, or maybe they're doing dual enrollment, but it's interesting. I rarely get a parent identifying their student as gifted when they contact me.

How about you, Mike?

**Mike Bergin:** [00:16:44] Well I think it's that parents might have higher expectations for their students than the first practice test or PSAT shows. So a parent might get through 10th grade thinking that their son or daughters are destined for perfect test scores, but once the evidence comes in, they're like, all right, I see that there's a disconnect. And that's really what they want to explore. Why is it that my historically brilliant child is not displaying that brilliance on these exams.

Another way to look at it is that the SAT and ACT are as different from conventional classes in school, as one sport is from another. So if a student has always been a preternaturally gifted softball player, that doesn't mean she's going to be just as good at volleyball. Her natural athleticism will definitely help once she learns the rules and practices and all of that, but nobody expects that. Nobody expects that if you are an amazing sculptor, you're instantly going to be brilliant at watercolors. They usually see that there's some transfer that's required. With parents of gifted children, they may not recognize that until the moment is upon them and they say, "Oh, I thought it would transfer directly." Clearly it is not.

**Emily Kircher-Morris:** [00:18:06] Yeah.

**Amy Seeley:** [00:18:07] I find as a test prep provider and sort of practitioner, they're kind of, there are sort of three levels that we work on. And the first of which is knowledge. Does the student have the knowledge? So like my example earlier of like using a colon, you can point blank ask a student, "what is your understanding of how to use a colon?" And if they can respond correctly with what that rule would be, then you know we're not dealing with a knowledge issue. The second thing would be, you know, kind of recognition. Did they notice there was a colon as an answer, you know? And, and if they did, you know, were they thinking about what they know about the use of colons?

And then the third is application. Okay, if you knew the rule and you recognize that was a colon, were you able to apply that information correctly? And so I think with students, you're trying to figure out in these individual questions, where are they within those three skills to make sure that if they know the information, then are you helping them recognize or are you helping them apply? And that's kind of the way in which I approached the process with students. Um, and they may or may not have the knowledge if they're gifted. They, they, that may not be something they knew before. And so that becomes where you start.

**Emily Kircher-Morris:** [00:19:13] Let's shift the conversation just a bit and talk a little bit more about twice exceptional kids. So twice exceptional kids are kids who are both gifted

and have another diagnosis, like a learning disability. So how do you help kids who are preparing to take these tests and apply to college, but they also have a learning disability. What does that look like?

**Mike Bergin:** [00:19:35] So very interestingly, twice exceptional students don't necessarily have the remedial study skills that a lot of gifted students have, in that they haven't had everything come easy to them. There were other challenges they had to learn to overcome, and that level of resilience and tenacity helps. It actually makes the test prep process easier for them, even though they may face some other challenges, as far as testing with accommodations and learning how to work within those boundaries go.

**Amy Seeley:** [00:20:08] One of the things that I find interesting is just the, just the access to accommodation. So for example, being able to get extra time, um, and that's where it does get kind of interesting I think with twice exceptional learners is what type of accommodations should they be linking into that are going to serve them the best?

So for example, is it a situation where they are going to test and get time and a half, or are they going to need double time or triple time? And then that creates the opportunity for discussions of, well, if you're going to have more than time and a half, um, obviously you aren't going to spend nine hours, you know, on a Saturday. So that brings into the, the discussion, are you going to test over multiple days? And what does that look like? So sometimes for those students, it's making sure that their requests for accommodations, um, are going to serve them well. Um, and certainly I would say, I find in the case of students who, um, you know, have these additional needs, um, it does serve them really well. I mean, having the extra time for them to process or to spread out the tests over multiple days can be hugely beneficial.

**Emily Kircher-Morris:** [00:21:21] Yeah.

**Mike Bergin:** [00:21:22] When the accommodations are necessary, they're necessary. And a lot of school districts, I'm not going to say they discriminate against twice exceptional students, but they're not always ready to put in the extra work to help exceptional students, students that are already excelling in the classroom, achieve those accommodations. So parents of twice exceptional students need to be strong advocates, to make sure that even if their students are excelling, they're getting great grades, that well-meaning teachers don't try to push these issues under the rug and say, well, he's fine anyway, he doesn't need the accommodation.

**Emily Kircher-Morris:** [00:22:01] Right.

**Amy Seeley:** [00:22:02] And sadly, I would say in my area, there is a distinct difference between how they get those additional services. If let's say for example, they might be in a private high school versus whether they are in a public high school. Um, some of our private independent high schools in Cleveland do an excellent job of addressing that for twice exceptional learners and yet in a public high school, they might actually not, you know, they may have to advocate much harder for themselves because again, like Mike said, you know,

you, if you're doing well in school, it's like, well, who needs extra services? And that's, that can become a battle.

**Emily Kircher-Morris:** [00:22:41] I find that a lot of times when I'm working with families, there's two obstacles that they face. The first is just not knowing how to go about requesting those accommodations. And the second part of it is that they're fearful that if they get accommodations on a test, that will somehow then influence their child's ability to, you know, apply to certain schools. What would you say to those families?

**Mike Bergin:** [00:23:04] Well, that's a great question, Emily. And we'd like to dispel the myth that testing with accommodations carries any kind of stigma. In fact, schools do not know whether a student received accommodations on the SAT or ACT. There's no asterisk next to the score.

**Amy Seeley:** [00:23:22] There used to be, but there is, there is no longer.

**Mike Bergin:** [00:23:26] It was very common. Yeah. When did that happen? 10 years ago?

**Amy Seeley:** [00:23:30] I would agree about 10 years ago. It's, it's been a while. Remember most, most myths that exist within test preparation are basically as a result of parents applying whatever standards they were aware of when they went through this process. And so of course, as many things have changed since parents were students... now, obviously if the student were to reveal in their application somewhere that they seek out or receive additional services, an admissions person could sort of say, "Oh, presumably the student took it with accommodations." Although I don't know that college admissions professionals necessarily dig that deep to discern that information or to use it in such a way to judge a student unfairly, let's say.

**Emily Kircher-Morris:** [00:24:14] So what advice would you give just for that process? You know, where, where do families start if they know that they need to, to look for those accommodations for their child?

**Amy Seeley:** [00:24:25] Well, I'm going to say first and foremost, a mis, a common mistake that may be made is that because of typically your, your testing results for let's say for an IEP or 504, they have to be within three years. So it's not uncommon for some families, you know, if the student were tested going into high school, that those accommodations or those plans, you know, those, those testing results are not current by junior year. And I think a big mistake is to let that lapse by junior year, in which case now, all of a sudden you don't have current testing to be able to use to apply for accommodations. So I think it's really critical that families are very careful that in that sophomore to junior year, make sure your testing is up to date and don't let someone convince you to let those accommodations go. Meaning, to say, "Oh, you're doing fine. You don't need to test again." That's a common error I find is families letting those, um, let there be a lapse and then they don't have those accommodations for testing.

**Emily Kircher-Morris:** [00:25:25] Right.



**Mike Bergin:** [00:25:26] Amy brings up kind of a fatal flaw in a student's process where he or she learns to compensate for whatever their learning disability is and stops taking advantage of their accommodations in class, just because they don't want the inconvenience. They don't want to take extra time to take tests because they do just fine without that. But if you stop using the accommodation in school, then you may not be granted the accommodation on the test when you need it.

**Emily Kircher-Morris:** [00:25:55] Right. It has to be documented and being implemented.

**Amy Seeley:** [00:25:58] And it's very common for, even like professionals, to say, "Oh, they're doing great in school, we don't need this, in which case we're going to like, you know, let it go." And it's like, ooh...

**Emily Kircher-Morris:** [00:26:08] Yeah.

**Mike Bergin:** [00:26:09] Another point Emily, about the application for accommodations process is that the counseling office of every high school has a direct channel. The process is streamlined. So whenever possible, families should work in partnership with their school counselors to get those accommodations.

**Emily Kircher-Morris:** [00:26:28] Well, I know that we could keep talking about this and I think maybe we'd love to have you back because I'd be interested in talking to you more even just about the direct application process, which I know you guys are very knowledgeable about as well, but, um, if people need to get in touch with you, how can they reach you?

**Mike Bergin:** [00:26:44] You can reach me at [mike@chariotlearning.com](mailto:mike@chariotlearning.com), Or go to the [chariotlearning.com](http://chariotlearning.com) website. We have a ton of information there, frequently asked questions about every aspect of the application process, including getting accommodations, how to get your best test scores, all of that. Also I'll say this before Amy starts talking that she and I are the cohosts of the Tests and the Rest podcast. And we love to cover all kinds of issues on testing, college admissions and learning, including a lot of podcast topics that are relevant to this particular conversation, including Emily, having had you talk about twice exceptional students. So, uh, that's uh, that's proof of how great our guests are.

**Emily Kircher-Morris:** [00:27:32] I'll take it.

**Amy Seeley:** [00:27:33] Yeah, lots of good material on the, uh, the, uh, the podcast, and, website [testsandtherest.com](http://testsandtherest.com). Um, you know, if listeners want to get ahold of me, the best way is through our website, which is [seeleytestpros.com](http://seeleytestpros.com) or just [amy@seeleytestpros.com](mailto:amy@seeleytestpros.com).

**Emily Kircher-Morris:** [00:27:48] Mike an Amy, thank you so much for your time today. We really appreciate it.

**Mike Bergin:** [00:27:52] It was so great to speak with you.

**Emily Kircher-Morris:** [00:27:59] I think, like a lot of people, I have mixed feelings about the use of tests for college admission. For the kids I work with who get stressed about the tests, I

try to help them remember that these tests do not define them. The scores are a single data point and aren't necessarily a make or break factor.

But for our underachieving gifted kids, the ACT and SAT can actually be a way for them to show what they are capable of doing, even if their transcripts don't show it. And although it might be counter-intuitive, these types of tests can actually help to level the playing field for bright students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds too.

It'll be interesting to see what the next five or ten years bring, as far as how colleges look at these assessments. Will other universities follow the path of making them optional? Or will the pendulum start to swing the opposite way? Either way, for right now, this is our reality and the ACT and SAT aren't going anywhere for most students. Understanding how the tests work and how to access accommodations can give kids the tools they need to succeed. I'm Emily Kircher-Morris. I'll see you next time on Mind Matters.

(music)

**Dave Morris:** [00:29:45] Thanks again to Mike Bergin and Amy Seeley from the Tests and the Rest podcast, you can find them at [www.Testsandtherest.com](http://www.Testsandtherest.com). Also, thanks to the hard working musicians and producers who provide the music for Mind Matters. We appreciate you guys and couldn't do it without you. If you'd like to help support us, man, we would love that. Go to [mindmatterspodcast.com](http://mindmatterspodcast.com) and click on 'support' at the top of the page. For Emily, I'm executive producer Dave Morris. Stay safe, stay healthy, see you next time.

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