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The Myth of the "Bad Test Taker": How to help any student maximize their SAT/ACT scores Dr. Maggie Wray interviews Jed Applerouth

Jed Applerouth is a teacher and an educational innovator. In addition to staying abreast of current research to enhance the pedagogical strategies of Applerouth, Jed gives presentations throughout the country on topics ranging from Gender in College Admissions to Helping Students with LDs Become Super Testers. No stranger to assessments, Jed scored a perfect 2400 on the old SAT and a super-scored 36 on the ACT. He earned his Bachelor's Degree from Penn's Wharton Business School, and went on to receive a Master's in Counseling and Doctorate in Educational Psychology. When he's not speaking to parents, teachers, and counselors about education and admissions testing, Jed is a counselor, painter, and globe-trotting photographer.



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Dr. Wray: Hi, everyone. Welcome. I'm Dr. Maggie Wray here from Creating Positive Futures Coaching where we help high school and college students develop the time management, organization and study skills they need to thrive.

What we find with so many of our students is that college is such a huge source of stress for them and for their families. That's why I'm really excited to be hosting this Your Teen Ready for College Conference again this year to connect with you all with some of the top experts in education and parenting and test admissions and psychology who can share strategies that will help set you up for success and help navigate this college process with a lot less stress along the way.

I know in particular for a lot of students, test-taking, those big standardized tests, the SAT and the ACT, are a huge source of stress and anxiety. If you're talking about stress in the college process, this is one of the big sources of it. And so that's why I'm really glad to have Jed Appelrouth here to talk with us today about helping students with anxiety or ADHD or all these, maximize their score on the SAT or the ACT even if they don't feel like they're great test takers.

And this is not just for kids who have some extenuating circumstances going on that makes testing hard for them. I think for any student, when you are excited about a college and you have your heart set on getting into a particular school and you know you have to hit a certain test score to do it, there's just a lot of stress in that process.

There's a lot of pressure to do well and to perform well, so it's really important to understand how to approach that with your A game, and Jed is an expert at helping students do that. He is the founder of Appelrouth Tutoring. I think one of the things that sets you apart as a company is just your ability to integrate that educational psychology part of your background, Jed, into the work that you do. You talk about student's mindset. You help students figure out their unique angle to taking the test and approaching it in a way that's going to work for them.

For those of you all who are watching who don't know, I used to be a tutor with Jed way back when, and that was one of the things I loved about your materials, just the way you presented things in this very approachable format that students could remember and retain and also help shift their mindset about the test and not just learn the content. It's just so refreshing, and not all tutoring companies do that.

And it totally makes sense because you've got your counseling background. You've got your PhD in Educational Psychology and all that expertise that you bring to the table, plus not to mention the 18 years of working with students, so you're just really the perfect person to talk about this. So thank you for being here with us today.

Jed: My pleasure, totally.

Dr. Wray: Great. Well, I'm curious to learn a little bit more about maybe some out of the box ways that students could approach the tests if these tests are stressing them out. One of the things that's come up recently is these test optional schools, so maybe a kid who is so stressed out and anxious, they just say, "Okay, forget it. I don't want to take the test at all. I just want to avoid this thing. Can I just apply to test optional schools?" Is that realistic, or are there too few schools out there that are test optional for that really to be a viable option?

Jed: There are definitely students who work with and for other subjects, helping them with academics testing who decide to go purely to test optional schools. And part of it, you're limiting the range and

scope of schools you can apply to. In most cases, a lot of the flagship state schools, which can have the best financial offerings are going to often, in most cases, require a test score.

The test optional movement has been growing. It started off like there were some 800 schools on that list, and now we're seeing more schools like the University of Chicago. We're seeing some better schools, Lake Forest, who are entering the mix.

But in my experience, part of it is that even the schools who are test optional themselves are not test blind in any way. If you can post a good test score, there is a much broader testing lane for the students who have good grades, rigor, and test scores, and a much smaller lane for students who apply without test scores, even for schools like Wake.

Roughly nine in ten students who were accepted have a test score. The same thing at the majority of schools that are test optional, 10-15% of students get in without test scores. But typically, they're not saying, "We're done with testing."

And there are certain schools for whom if you don't have a test score, it's going to be very challenging, if not impossible, to get merit-based financial aid. There are many schools that allocate their aid based on a GPA rigor and test scores, so for those who are looking for a good deal in college, the merit awards are very substantial and quite important for a lot of kids.

So I think, for me, test optional for sure is going to be a pathway for some kids who have extreme challenges. But in my experience, so many kids can find a way to get a score that'll put them in a competitive place for so many colleges. And before you say, "We're just hopping out of the game, we're not going to do testing," I think it's worth applying some energy and effort to see if I actually can overcome this hurdle, because for so many kids as well, the next academic hurdle, there will be a GRE. There will be a GMAT, LSAT.

And the idea of "I'm just going to hop off the testing," unless you're going to be a bachelor's degree and finished, and in this economy, education is more important than it's ever been. People are re-skilling. They're going back for advanced degrees at a level that's without precedent in our history. So my sense is if you can find a way to turn this into a mastery learning experience versus, "I'm just not going to play this game," I think it'll actually be a benefit in your life and later educational opportunities down the road.

Dr. Wray: That's a great way to look at it, actually, more as an ability to hone that test taking skill or to improve your abilities as a critical thinker, whatever, all those skills are that go into test-taking, even your mindset, rather than just saying, "Okay, I'm not going to play this game because I'm not good at it." It almost makes me think of "Do you have a growth mindset about test taking?" or "Do you have a fixed mindset about test taking?"

Jed: Exactly.

Dr. Wray: I think a lot of kids have a fixed mindset about test taking. They just think, "Okay, well I'm a bad test taker. Test taking has never been my thing. I don't know how to do it. I've never been good at it. And the SAT and the ACT are sort of the worst of those because there's no way to study for it. It's just a test of what you know and what you don't, and "I'm just not a good test taker, so I give up." So how do you combat that if a student has that kind of a fixed mindset?

Jed: We have to address it head on and talk about it and pick it apart, and find examples that are contrary experience. Students can come with an over-generalized black and white view. There's binary. "I'm either good at taking tests or I'm not." And part of it, I help explain to them that testing, having some anxiety or fear about performance is quite normal.

There has been some research that in high school, 61% of students experience test anxiety some of the time. That's six in ten, and then one in four students experience it almost all the time. So you aren't alone by having some anxiety and fear about assessments.

But part of it, throughout your life, you've had to deal with tests of some sort. The SAT and the ACT, they're not singular. We have testing all the way through with end of course testing. We have AP exams. And the SAT and ACT, I guess, are the highest stakes test that many of these kids will have taken in their lives because they actually count and they affect outcomes for admissions, for scholarships and other things like that. So they count, but there are going to be other assessments in your life where the stakes are a little bit higher.

And even having finished my counseling degree, then I was facing this National Counseling Certified Test. So again, even after I finished my academic work, there is going to be an assessment and many times throughout our careers, we're going to have a test or some assessment of some sort which will count and we're going to have to find a way to prepare ourselves, get ready emotionally, mentally for the assessment, bring our A game.

So if the student comes and says that black and white, "I'm just not a good test taker," I'm going to first start to do a query. And let's actually explore, has there ever been a time on a test that you've had success? And I'm tracking for any mastery events in their past, because what happens when you have a black and white belief like that, the idea of confirmation bias that we tend to confirm things, things that go in line with our thesis, we attend to them and lock into them and they're very important. And things which disconfirm, which go against it, we tend to ignore and we tend to downplay.

And often, what happens, so my idea is that I'm a bad test taker. That's a big idea and so things that go against it, I reject. So my thing is re-mining your past history, has there ever been a test that you didn't totally fail? Has there ever been an assessment where you had some success? Let's talk about that. And what did you do for that test? What happened? What was it about? What was it like? What was your experience?

And I start to have them think more critically versus this monolithic "I can and can't" because, obviously, that is flawed thinking. That's pretty sloppy thinking of this binary thing. And also, throughout your history, there have been many smaller assessments that you've obviously had to prepare for, go in there, take it, it counted, and you did okay.

So ultimately, in your mind, you could be elevating this test to a different level but it's not a different category. It's simply a different context. But if you've had success in the past academically with assessments and tests, then we can bring the same skills you apply there to here. And to your point, let's do a mindset shift, a cognitive shift. Because ultimately, if you're a student and taking exams and APs, you have to perform with pressure and learn things and recall them in a timed condition. This isn't that different.

But in my experience, so many kids can find a way to get a score that'll put them in a competitive place for so many colleges. And before you say, "We're just hopping out of the game, we're not going to do testing," I think it's worth applying some energy and effort to see if I actually can overcome this hurdle, because for so many kids as well, the next academic hurdle, there will be a GRE. There will be a GMAT, an LSAT.

And if you have the idea of "I'm a bad test taker," that idea, which is a self-efficacy statement, is going to totally shift the way you approach how effective you are and when you give up versus someone who has a belief "I am a good test taker," they're going to have a challenge, a hard thing, and they're going to double down. They're going to try something else. They're going to try to shift perspective and say, "Can I solve this? I'm good at this."

And so the exact same students, they have the same level of ability, but one of them has this idea of "I'm good at this," one "I'm bad at this," and that totally changes the outcome. So we're going to be working and hammering away, chiseling away at that idea of "I'm a bad test taker" and every time, if they're working with us, that we have some success, stop the press. Let's redirect all your attention to that moment of success and let's process that and let's make you attend to it and make you focus on it and make you articulate what happened, why you achieved this outcome, and what specific skills you brought that were effective. And I'm not going to let you write it off with "I got lucky." No. What did you do specifically to achieve this outcome and how can you repeat it in the future?

So I make them become, again, more critical evaluation, more thinking, and more trying to attend to what's working and why. And little by little, they're shifting their belief from "I'm bad at this" to "I can do this."

And this applies also to "I'm bad at math". This also applies to "I'm not a science person," "Language, I have a hard time memorizing," because, again, whatever happened in the past, part of your past is totally colored by the filters you had that were bringing in certain information and turning out information.

So I want to kind of drop the filters and in the moment, in the middle of this thing, make that a teaching moment when you have some success. Those mastery events are critical for shifting that mindset.

Dr. Wray: I love that, because it's not only changing what sounds like it really becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy where a student goes in saying, "I'm a bad test taker," and then they become a bad test taker.

Jed: There you go. If you're fighting for your limitations, now you have them. There you are.

Dr. Wray: Right. There you go. You won. Congratulations. So you're helping them shift that, which is so powerful, and I think what's really amazing about this process you're describing this tutor is really honing in on let's pause, stop the press, we've got to focus on the success and help you notice it. You're almost reprogramming their brains to become more optimistic, to become more than just convinced in their own ability to change their outcomes through effort and through practice, which is back to, again, that whole growth mindset. And you have to have that.

Like you were talking about today, education is so essential in the job market. Your job is going to change. Your whole industry is probably going to change. Even if you're going to college for a particular

thing, if you don't have that mindset that "I can learn anything if I put my mind to it," your skills are going to be rapidly out of date.

So really, I feel like a lot of people approach this whole test taking process as sort of this useless exercise. "Let me go prepare for this useless SAT that's going to get me into college and that's it." But the way that you're describing it, I really feel like it's almost character skills training for students.

Jed: Yeah. It's learning to learn and it's allowing yourself to overcome obstacles. And to me, it is broader than just this one context of getting into college. It really is this thing of we all come into the world and we develop at some point some self-limiting beliefs. And part of it is, do you want to carry those? And how long do you want to carry that water? How long do you want to have that be a limiting factor in your life and have it truncate your choices?

Because there are 2500 schools, but if I have this belief of "I can't take tests" I have now suddenly massively narrowed the schools that I'm going to go to. I may not be able to go to the one that's a great deal or really go to Georgia Tech or UGA. They all need test scores.

And ultimately, and then for graduate school, "Do I want to apply to go get my MBA?" or, "Well, there's a GMAT in front of me," or there's some other assessment, versus, "Well, I just can't take tests. I just can't go that path." I want people to have as many choices as they possibly can, and when you carry these limiting beliefs and reinforce them, they are going to limit your experience and they're going to shift your life in a way that makes you smaller. It diminishes you, essentially.

So whenever someone comes with a limiting belief, I want to blow it up. I want them to experience their potential, the fullness of possibilities that are right before them. I'm an artist, I love to paint. And again and again, you hear people, "I can't draw. I can't paint." They're fighting for these beliefs.

I've seen, like in my art class, the same thing. I had a teacher. People came in like, "I can't draw a stick figure," but then when I go back to it, every single human being starts off drawing stick figures. And it's just, do we want to stick with it? Does it give us pleasure? Is it reinforcing, or do we have some negative critical stuff of "You're bad at this" and then you put it away for 40 years?

And the same is I've seen people go through art classes going from stick figures to learning shading and making beautiful work, and again, blowing up the idea of "I can't do this." The same thing with math. People come in, "I just can't. My brain is not built for math." It's like if we're having this conversation, if you have this logical – you can learn math.

There's a balance point of less pleasure for me here, and oftentimes, there's less pleasure, less dopamine, there's less interest. Or part of it, interest is often tied to our efficacy beliefs. If I believe I'm going to have a good outcome here, I'm more interested versus if I'm concerned about failure, I don't like that. And I try to tease out and pick apart the distinctions there of "Inherently there's less pleasure for me here" versus "I'm scared I'm going to have a bad outcome, and therefore, I'm not going to like this as a means of protecting my ego and myself."

But ultimately, in my experience, the majority of students, we can all improve and many can get quite good at areas that before, they just said, "I'm not built for this," if we shift and awaken potentials in them. And again, it always comes from going back to the basics and building blocks. The smallest

successes, we focus on them as we shift that sense of who I am and what I'm capable of. It starts very small but it's amazing.

Again, you have the first experience. It's positive or negative, and then you can decide "I'm good at this" or "I'm bad at this" and the whole Carol Dweck mindset, it's "I can learn this." and ultimately, failures are actually powerfully helpful to work with and learn from, of "Okay, you applied this strategy. How did it work out? And what do we have to change?"

And again, it's that sense of studying your strategy. What did you use? How did you do it? Was it effective? If not, let's shift it. That is the growth mindset, and that is something you can bring to everything in your life.

Every single problem, I can learn how to do this even if my father wasn't a good mechanic, but I can still learn. I'm not limited genetically because I watched my father break the toilet one time, and from then on, he hired people. It's like, you know what? I'm watching other folks fixing things and learning some mechanics and stuff. If they can do this, I can do this. And it's not "I'm limited somehow." Even if I see a parent or a sibling struggle, it doesn't mean that innately, there's something that's flawed inside of me. I can learn.

And so I think you and I both bring the sense of "We can learn things" and we can impart that to our students, that ultimately, learning is not blocked off from us. And for sure, how we're built, we're going to have more facility with certain things, things that are visual. I have a really robust visual cortex, so things with patterns and visual things, I can get quickly. Other things will take me a little bit longer.

But we can all improve our processes at every single area of learning. And so it's helping teach kids that, to open up, again, to learn optimism and things that are permanent, pervasive and personal, like "I'm bad at math," which is always, in all contexts, learning optimism [18:24 inaudible] let's blow up all those things that are permanent versus context based.

So you had a bad test. Let's examine the context. How much did you study? How long? And what can we change? Versus just, "I'm bad at chemistry or math or test taking." Let's blow up those permanent big ideas and get more specific, more focused, more contextual.

Dr. Wray: I think in the process of doing that, just helping students shift out of that limiting mindset of "I'm not a good test taker", you're going to take away, naturally, a lot of the anxiety that comes along with the test-taking process. And I also find a lot of students saying, not necessarily the "I'm bad at test-taking," although that's a huge one for so many students. I'm really glad we addressed that. And all your other students say, "I get so much test anxiety. I do badly because I get so anxious."

And so I was curious about that. First of all, how true is that belief, that you do badly when you're anxious, or can you still do well even if you're anxious? And if it is impacting performance, how do we help students address that if maybe they've got this sense of fear that at this point is just kind of programmed into their brain. They show up on a test and they're just hit with this sense of just a very visceral fear. It's not something that they realize they're even thinking. It just happens sort of automatically. How do you help them work through that so that they can actually do well?

Jed: And there is a curve, the Yerkes Dodson Curve of arousal, stress level, and performance. And what's interesting is on the very lowest level of the curve when there's no anxiety, there's low performance. When there's no arousal, then it's like if things don't count, you don't really bring to bear

your full skill set. If you're like, "Whatever. I'm not concerned about the outcome." Then on the far side, when there's way too much stress and arousal, that's when the performance gets trashed.

There's a sweet spot right in the middle which is the optimal level. You have enough stress to know it matters and this actually counts and you have to be attentive and focused. But not so much. That's definitely the point. They call it eustress, where it's just the right amount of stress.

And for students, it really varies. Some of them come and say "I was a nervous wreck", then they get their test back and they got a 97. And that is the idea of the anxiety in that case is actually adaptive and it's helpful and it's contributing to their performance.

And again, they're on that curve where the arousal level is not so much that it's pushing them into decay of their performance. And everyone is different. Some people, they are very clear that they experience anxiety but they get good scores. In that case, okay, we can work with it because obviously it's not comfortable for them, but they're still achieving performance.

Then there are students, we've worked with them before, where there is a lot of stress and it totally tanks. They don't show up and it's overwhelming to their system. And in that case, we have to ratchet back that anxiety because here, it's really a problem.

And part of it, there's some evidence in terms of what's happening when you have so much anxiety. There are a couple things happening. On one level, it's cognitive and it's called cognitive obstruction where you have these negative thoughts which can become flooding and it's "I'm going to fail," "Oh, God", and you can imagine the outcome.

Suddenly, you aren't focusing on the task at hand, and you're flooded with all of these other thoughts. For students, that can be so crippling. But now there's not enough energy mentally. Their work memory is now overtaken, overrun by off-task thoughts. And there is some research that up to 40% of our thinking can be based on "Oh, God, I'm screwing up" which isn't really great for helping this problem at hand.

In those cases, let's shift the thinking, the self-talk. Let's kind of adjust that. And also, neurochemically, there's some research and evidence with anxiety that there is a spike of stress hormone. And you need some. Again, naturally, people who are taking a test have a spike in the catecholamines, in their cortisol levels. You need some spike in the hormones which say "This matters, focus" so you can inhibit the distractions and attend.

So a little bit of cortisol is great, but the problem is when there is way too much, when it's just dumping and then you get into fight or flight. Then it's not "this matters." Now it's "Oh God." Now it becomes a threat and it goes from an opportunity to threat and suddenly, all you see is danger and your systems, your heart rate, everything starts shifting in terms of your pulse, your pupil dilation, your skin tension, everything gets ready for a fight because we have the same system of addressing fear as we did a million years ago, running from animals.

We're ready, the big muscle groups are flooded with bloodstream, our stomachs lose blood flow so we feel kind of funny. It's an old system of how we attend to threats. And so in this case, we have to learn a way to inhibit and bring down the stress hormone. And so much of it, it's all an inside job because it's a

thought, “This is a threat. I should be afraid,” that’s creating both the physical symptoms, the neurochemical changes, cognitive changes, and it’s all an inside job.

I’ve had kids leave tests crying. I’ve had kids just collapse like, “I am just failing here,” and either just turn off or now it’s over and give up. The big things are fight, flight, freeze or fold. I’ve had kids leave, flee, I’ve had kids collapse. And I guess the better one is to cognitively fight. But so much of this, there are many, many things we can do without throwing medication or molecules to help bring down the adrenaline system.

This is a huge thing. To me, one of the biggest gifts is teaching students how to self-regulate when they have anxiety, because they are going to be facing stressful situations their entire lives, academically, when they go in for a job interview, when they go to give a speech, when they go to perform, anything.

And so much of this has to do with “Are there other ways you’ve learned to bring down your stress or arousal before a big sporting event, before you go in front of a debate stage? What do you do, and how can we bring to bear those skills? Let me talk to them about doing some deep breathing exercises, because when you do the deep diaphragmatic breathing, it stimulates the vagus nerve, which really shuts down the sympathetic nervous system.

When you’re doing deep breathing, it affects and changes and brings down the heart rate, respiration rate, all these things and even the stress levels. So doing the deep breathing, doing the changes to yourself talk and doing some thought replacement, a little bit of cognitive behavioral stuff.

And additionally, there is some quick intervention of doing about a ten minute writing exercise of writing about anxiety, because you’re trying to get them from the amygdala, the fear center where I’m identifying a threat, to the frontal cortex which is able to send some **[25:32 inaudible]** back to the amygdala and calm it down and inhibit some of the stress.

And the frontal cortex can say, “It’s going to be okay. We have prepared.” And it can calm down the amygdala. There is this nice loop that gets more developed as we get older where we’re able to bring down our anxiety. We feel the anxiety. It’s there, and then we’re able to use our internal mechanisms to calm ourselves down, getting back to center.

So much of the work is helping students learn how to get back to center. When there’s a spike in fear and this direct reception, how do I calm myself back down? And this is a profound life skill. And doing mindfulness training, observing the thinking, and again, with breathing, with tensing your muscles, relaxing your muscles, closing your eyes, how do I get myself back to center?

I’m holding a little crystal thing here. There are times before big speeches, if I’m giving a lecture, I’ll have a thing in my hand and I’ll hold it as a little thing of trying to center myself. Right now it’s something to play with, but in the grand scheme, there are so many ways people learn how to calm themselves down, and this is no different.

And there’s also a great technique – I love this one – that I learned in cross country practice years ago where the coach would have us close our eyes for ten minutes and he would guide us through, after practice before a big meet, he’d have us imagine ourselves going through every single step of the race, how we’re feeling, if we pass someone, what’s happening with our body. You begin to lay down this

mental track, a new neural pathway of yourself performing at this level in the midst of a stressful condition of a race.

And I do that with kids. Academically, having them close their eyes, having them learn how to make a neural pathway, a mental walkthrough of this test, “How are you doing? You missed one, how do you feel? Take a breath.”

So you’re beginning to replace any old prior stressful memories with this new neural pathway, this new memory you’re trying to ingrain so when it comes to this test, they actually have another example they can pull from, “Okay, I missed a problem and it’s okay,” and you begin to work your self-talk of “You know what? It’s only one problem. We’re okay. Onward and upward.”

Because the self-talk is really a huge part of it if you sustain anxiety or short circuit it, and if you’re feeding yourself thoughts of “Oh God, it’s over and now it’s downhill from here,” that’s going to perpetuate and increase versus, “Missed one. Let’s keep focusing. We’re doing great. You’ve worked hard. Let’s go.”

And the inner messaging, the self-talk is huge. That ultimately is the main skill we’re trying to cultivate, the ability to bring ourselves back to center with our inner language and our self-talk. So that’s why I say it’s an inside job. There’s breathing, but self-talk and combining all these things together allows people to learn how to calm themselves and ground themselves when they’re stressed.

Dr. Wray: Right. And it’s great that you’re also talking about pulling in skills from other contexts, like you were talking about with the cross country and then you’re pulling that visualization exercise from cross country into maybe a test-taking environment, probably because a lot of these kids have some context in their life where they can handle pressure.

I mean, not all of them. Maybe some of them, they’re going to need to lay down these skills for the first time ever because they’ve always had a hard time under pressure. But they may have a sport where they’re doing great and they have certain coping strategies that they use under these high stakes performance-based situations in that context of their life, and all the strategies that you just talked about, the muscle tension and relaxing, breathing, visualizing, all of that sounds like the stuff they could really practice in the months leading up to the test because you’re all going to be working, tutoring them leading up to the test.

They could be working on that beforehand so that it’s not like they’re getting in on the day of the test trying to sort it out, “Oh my gosh, how do I self-regulate? How do I figure this out?” and trying to manage in the moment. It’s almost like the skills for test taking, except it’s the skills for self-regulation that need to go along with the skills for test-taking and they’re practicing both along the way based on how you described it.

Jed: That’s right. Also, it’s not all eastern for some people. It’s going to be hard exercise. It really helps them ground their anxiety. I know people in my life who, for them, if they don’t exercise and run, then their mental health is affected dramatically. And also sleep.

Obviously, there’s a basic, there’s a thought exercise, the trifecta, getting those right can also help dramatically the mental health that we have. And for everything, for anxiety, depression, addiction, you get those right – sleep, exercise and diet – and it affects every system.

So that's also doing a quick self-care check-up on the students. And for some, it's going to be they have to run hard and then they're just calm internally after they get that. Because when you run, it's endorphins, serotonin, it's dopamines, it's all the good stuff and that helps counter the cortisol.

So there are many ways in, and this really is in the context of how to overcome any skill, because we're all going to have performance things in our life. There's no way not to. Whether it's giving a speech at your friend's wedding or whatever, there's going to be something where there's stress. How do I perform at my optimal? I was reading this book called *Daring Greatly* last night.

Dr. Wray: Yes, it's so good.

Jed: It's so good. Brown and her speech, her Ted Talk on vulnerability. We're going to have to, at some point, put ourselves out there and we're going to have some stress. How do we get ourselves centered that we're going to have to show up in our lives? I think, to me, this is not just a little thing of test taking. This is a major, hugely transferable life skill. Self-regulation is the key to everything, so we're giving them a little bit of it in this moment of how to self-regulate, because you'll need this everywhere throughout your life.

Dr. Wray: So true. I think the whole college process, really in a way, if you approach it the right way, and some people approach it completely the wrong way as we've seen with the little recent college admissions scandal.

There are all sorts of reasons why some people approach it the completely wrong way, but if you approach it the right way with this test prep, with how you're going about with the self-exploration that goes with writing your essays, when you're trying to become the best possible student you can be at school, get engaged with extracurriculars, all of these different pieces of the college process that I feel like are really serving the student's growth as a human being, not just their ability to get into a particular school or something like that.

People are thinking about it in this way that's so narrow, and if we just broaden that picture, the SAT and the ACT take on this whole new meaning.

Before we totally lose track, because I could just talk with you for a day and still learn new things, I want to make sure we get into that whole SAT versus ACT, especially for students who have any sort of LDs or maybe they have ADHD or they have something going on that's going to maybe make testing a little bit harder for them.

They've maybe gotten over this self-limiting belief of "I'm just not a good test-taker; I can't do this, I opt out, forget it." So we've gotten them past that, and then we've gotten them to the point where they can regulate their anxiety enough to focus on the test.

I'm wondering about the test format itself in terms of the SAT versus the ACT. What might predispose a student to take one versus the other? And also, how do we approach accommodations through all of this to make sure the students have the best testing environment for them?

Jed: A lot of our students who have learning differences, they tend, in many cases, to go towards the ACT for a number of reasons. The biggest challenge on the ACT is more timing. In many cases, students who have diagnosed disabilities are going to be able to get extra time on the ACT and that really solves the timing issue, and that helps them dramatically.

The SAT has a much higher reading level. It's about three grade levels higher, so we're seeing more advanced text, vocabulary, and so a lot of students, if they have dyslexia or other things, the lower level reading on the ACT is really quite helpful. And so that's the shift that I've seen over time.

In terms of getting accommodations, you have to apply early. Ideally, you're applying for them for the PSAT so there's plenty of time, and then you do all the prep, the focus with the accommodations as the foundation. If you have time and a half, everything you do is time and a half, so you're learning how to work with the time allotted. If you have some other accommodation, whether it's a quiet room or whether it's large font, whatever you're working with, let's try to recreate those conditions in our practice sessions.

And ultimately, it's not all students. Again, it's a heuristic that typically I see more LD kids going to the ACT, but there are many who find their way and succeed at a very high level on the SAT. So one of the most important things is we have to do a dual baseline.

I want to do a practice test for pretty much every single kid who comes to us, and if they know they're going to have the accommodation, then let's use it with that and see. "How do you do with time and a half on the SAT versus the ACT?" Because they're also a little bit different.

The SAT, the math is more like a reading-based math and it's not as advanced. ACT has more advanced math and for some kids, math is their issue. The bigger focus on algebra and functions, that's maybe more comfortable, and word problems, for a kid on the SAT. And there's less trig. There's less advanced math all over.

Additionally, with a science fluency, there's a lot more science, and actual science assessed on the ACT and there's less of it on the SAT. For these reasons, students are going to have more or less abilities on one test or the other. Some kids are on the range of indifference where it doesn't matter, in which case, I defer to their preference.

But before I do anything, I want to give them a test of each and I want to see where they land and see where they're stronger, whether they have a disability or not, before we start any prep at all, because it's impossible for me to tell this based on your "I'm bringing this, I'm good at this, I'm a reader here." I can make a guess, but I can also be wrong, and to me, I want to get rid of the guesswork.

And so let's spend a few hours on a couple Saturdays or let's use your PSAT as a proxy. Let's have a comparison before I throw you into any kind of preparation because some kids, they're 100 points off. And so I could waste ten hours on one area where you would have started off just here, if we just started there on this test, so we just kind of blew that time and resources. And so that's the beauty of doing a baseline testing. Really important, I think, for this work.

Dr. Wray: Yeah, that's a great point, and we're kind of leaving this without really saying it but we're treating it as an assumption and I just want to make it very plain to people who are watching. We're kind of operating under the assumption you're going to prep for one or the other. You're not necessarily going to prep for both. Because I do hear still, surprisingly enough, from some students who say, "Well, my school makes me take both, so I'm just going to prepare for both. I'm going to do this whole prep process for both of them."

And I'm curious about your thoughts on that, because I know my preference but it seems like from your description here, we're talking about take both and see which one you do better on and then go with that one. So is that kind of a myth that you need to do both always?

Jed: It is totally a myth. The tests overlap roughly 80%. So four-fifths of the work will transfer. But that 20% difference is a very profound difference in a world where the difference between a 1300 and 1400, a small difference can make a huge change on where you're accepted and if you get into an honors program or scholarships.

So to me, it's much more efficient to, once we identify where you're stronger or where is your natural preference, let's put all of our attention and energy in that basket. And the only time I ever go back and shift is if you're in the range of indifference where you're within 70 points on the SAT scale. You have a 1200 SAT and a 26 ACT. Okay, you're roughly the same. Then I'll defer to student preference and we'll start prepping.

And if after two baseline tests, things are moving, then I'll say, "You know what? Why don't we go back and try the other one?" Because, again, we've been prepping for a time, and when you're prepping for one, you are de facto prepping for the other. Again, about 8/10 transfers. So let me see, if for whatever reason, we're making gains on this one.

But if the student is prepping, then they do practice tests and they're making progress, we don't look back because you're applying an intervention, you're doing work, and it's showing a return. Let's keep going with that, and again, not have to worry about the distinct timing and the very challenging timing of the ACT, the higher level reading.

Because part of it is we're shifting for the SAT, then I'm not worrying about the timing stuff on the science section. I don't want to burden them and shift them away from their focus, because if we really channel our attention and our energy, I can use that leverage and get a higher return on one test than if it's more diffuse and I'm splitting our time and our resources on two tests.

So once we identify it as our test, let's go full-on [38:37 inaudible] area of weakness you have. Let's address it. Let's correct it. Let's have you at your very best. And then we're blowing the other one away. Once we're really zoning in on the nuances of SAT reading, on the nuances of the SAT, the way they present math questions, I can focus your attention, which to me, is more effective and more efficient.

Dr. Wray: It totally makes sense to me, and I know you mentioned at the beginning, those test optional schools, they still do sometimes prefer, especially for merit aid, for students to be submitting test scores and there is an advantage to submitting it even though the schools say that they're optional. Is there any advantage at all to students submitting an SAT and ACT, or is that just basically that it makes no difference?

Jed: I have not heard from a single admissions office in the country that said, "We are going to give preference to students who submit both." There was an article. Now it's five years old. There was someone from, I think, NYU. It was somewhere in the New York Times where they're like, "We love all testing. If you have more, send it. We'll take it." But they definitely didn't say, "We're going to give a preference and we're going to give an advantage in admissions to kids who take two."

What they want is, "Do you have the score we need, either on the SAT or the ACT?" And if you have a 35 and a 1500, it's more confirmation. But by the merits of you already have this test, okay, then essentially

at that point, testing is checked. Testing is great. So hitting more testing, okay, that's not going to compensate for a weaker essay. That's not going to compensate for weaker activities or teacher recs.

Testing will take you so far, and testing for the various types of schools will get you into the conversation, but it doesn't push you into the accept pile. Testing is one part of it, so it's simply like a filter. Things have never been so selective at the top. The top 100 schools, all of them are driving lower and lower acceptance rates, so testing is simply one more. It's like a funneling process of how do we go from 40,000 applications and choose a class of 2,000. Well, testing is one mechanism to get you closer and then it does become holistic, essentially, the review process in terms of your activities, your recs, your grades, your rigor, all these things. It all factors in. But testing alone is not going to push you into coming this selective school. It gets you into the conversation, essentially.

Or if your scores aren't in that band they're looking for, it keeps you out of the conversation. So testing is like a hurdle. GPA, testing and rigor is like a gateway, and then, "Okay, what else do you bring in terms of activities, in terms of personality, in terms of self-awareness, in terms of what kind of person are you going to be on campus after we assess, can you hack our academics? Are you going to be able to survive and thrive, and get out of here in four years or six years? Which we're graded on in terms of our rankings. Because we want to make sure, first and foremost, academically, you have the chops to hang out here and not transfer out or fail out."

Dr. Wray: Right. Completely makes sense. Well, so it really does seem like at some point, you've done enough prep to get over that hurdle. If you keep sinking more and more time into that process, you're doing it at the expense of those other things, like working on your essays or developing those relationships with your teachers or something along those lines, so it does make sense.

You do your test prep process and then you're done. And getting over that hurdle, I know can be tough, but we talked about some strategies to help with that. I know having the right accommodations set up if you are a student who has the need for them can be a really big difference maker as well.

And I'll hear sometimes from families who maybe waited too long to apply, they didn't think it through, they've already signed up for their test and it's past the point where they can really get the accommodations and it's such a shame because the student really does need them, but they don't have them in place. So when should families be starting to think about that timeline of applying for those accommodations to make sure that they don't end up in that situation?

Jed: As early as possible is the answer.

Dr. Wray: Is there a "too early" or no?

Jed: Ideally, with the College Board, once you get your SSD, your number with a disabilities number, that stays with you through everything. That will stay with you through your AP exams. So I want to get that ideally for the PSAT, so well before they're talking about the SAT, I want to find out, "Are they going to grant me accommodations? Here is my IEP or 504. Here is my proof of accommodations in my high school. I want to get that number." Once you have it, it's yours.

Dr. Wray: That could be sophomore year?

Jed: Yeah, sophomore year is great. That's great because then you know what you're going to get from the college board, if they're going to honor your accommodations in high school and your disability.

And so in a similar fashion, for the ACT, ideally, I'm going to find out some kids, their schools offer the pre-ACT. You can get it for that and if you're given it for that, you can reapply and it's much easier getting it for every future test. Some students do a fake testing administration for the ACT where they can just sign up just to see what they're going to get, so they're going to sign up very early.

It could be you sign-up for the July ACT before you're a junior and you haven't finished all your preparation yet. But then you're going to find out, because you have to apply for a test. I'm applying for accommodations on a given test for the ACT, so I could be applying for that July ACT to see if they'll accept it, if they're going to honor the accommodation. If not, they may come back and say, "We need more information." And I want to find out earlier versus waiting until it's critical.

And typically, they want to see four months of accommodation in high school. Do I already have that? Or they may want more teacher statements, more information about the way in which they're using accommodations in school before they grant the accommodation.

So end of sophomore year is great, applying. That's perfect, or very early junior year. Beyond that, it starts getting stressful and the likelihood of you not getting what you need in time increases. So my thing is early, early, early. Think early and find out because, again, some kids are going to have to appeal if they aren't accepted in that first pass, and they want full documentation. It might be that they don't have recent testing and they want more testing.

And these things take time to go and talk to your counselor, get a psych evaluation, which takes time and money. So I want to find out very early on what they're going to do. So I would say end of sophomore, summer before, early junior. That's a great time, because waiting until late junior, it's just, as you know – we've seen this – when the level of stress goes way up and then early senior, it's like you kind of missed the boat on this thing.

Dr. Wray: At that point, it's just too late. And I'm thinking, too, families who are in, maybe even going into fall of sophomore year, because at some point, they may just say, "You're too soon. You can't sign up for your PSAT accommodations at this point. You're a freshman. You're an eighth grader." At some point, there's too early.

Jed: Right. But sophomore year is great.

Dr. Wray: So sophomore year, and anytime is fine?

Jed: The sophomore year PSAT is perfect. So I can get my time and a half set up for that, or the pre-ACT, or I sign up for end of sophomore year ACT, totally fine. Even if you're going to defer that administration until later, that's great. Spend the money. You'll find out where you stand.

Dr. Wray: That's good to know. So you can sign up and then you can push the test date. They could grant you the accommodations and then you could say, "Thanks for the accommodations, and I'm not going to use them here. I'm going to use them later." They don't have to actually take the test.

Jed: No. You can say, "thank you." It's like an administration which you use to determine what they're going to do. It's totally fine, totally appropriate.

Dr. Wray: That's great to know because that way, you don't have to have your test date for sure picked out and your whole prep schedule planned out.

Jed: Even before you prepped, even before you do a minute of prep, you sign up for administration and then find out, because that'll affect how you prep. If I'm going to prep with time and a half conditions, I've got to first find out if they'll actually give that to me. And if they say, "No, we're not going to give you those," then I have to prep accordingly, or appeal and find out what else they need.

So yeah, that to me, is a best practice, to find out even before you're looking at taking a test. That, to me, is great.

Dr. Wray: That completely makes sense, and it's such a good way of thinking about it that might not occur to you if you weren't thinking this through. So I'm really glad you shared that tip with us because it's definitely something I'm going to encourage our families to do.

So yeah, this has been so helpful. Thank you, Jed, for taking the time to talk with us today and to share all these ideas. I know, also, we've talked a little bit about comparing SAT and ACT scores. For families who want to follow-up with you all for more information, we're going to post a link right below this interview, for anybody who's watching, to the college admissions testing guide that Appelrouth has created, which is a really great resource that's all about the test scores, GPAs, and the class ranks of the accepted students at a number of colleges and universities across the country.

So you can kind of look and see, "Okay, I'm thinking I want to get into this kind of a school. What score range am I looking at? Maybe I can compare that to my PSAT score to see how far I have to go." You can look at your concordance tables of SAT versus ACT and say, "Okay, I scored this on my SAT. What would I need to get on an ACT to tell me that that's the better test for me versus not the better test for me?" So just all that information is going to be there.

There are lots of additional tips there as well about PSATs and SATs and how to approach the test-taking process and secure accommodations, so it's really full of great information. Definitely check that out whether you have a student with LDs or ADHD or any other accommodations or not, it's still got really great information in there. You'll definitely want to get a copy of it. So it's right below our interview. Just click that link to go over to Appelrouth's website and get a copy of it.

And then if you all have been watching today and you want to share this with a friend, share it with maybe a family you know who has a kid who's getting close to their test prep or a parent you know who's been stressing out about test prep and the fact that their kid is not a good test taker, maybe you could share this interview with them because we do really want to help make sure that as many families as possible get access to this information.

So the replay will be up for 48 hours. Please feel free to share the link with anyone you know who might benefit. And if you want to keep a copy of it forever, we have that option for you all as well. Just go to yourteenreadyforcollege.com/event and you can grab a copy of the whole interview series, all the recordings, all the transcripts, everything that's included so that you can keep it forever.

If you've got multiple kids going through the process you want to refresh on this, or maybe you're a super proactive parent and your child is not yet in sophomore year or even close and they're going to be going in as a freshman and you want to hang onto this, these things don't really change in terms of the SAT versus the ACT, the self-regulation processes, how you apply for accommodations. All of those things are going to be pretty constant. So if you want to hang onto it as a reminder, you can get a copy and keep it forever.

So thank you again, Jed, for joining us. This has been such a pleasure and so much fun. I always learn from you every time, so thanks so much for joining us.

Jed: My pleasure.

Dr. Wray: Have a great day, everyone, and I'll see you soon.