



Students take a practice exam during a SelectivePrep course earlier this month at National Louis University in Chicago. | JOHN J. KIM/SUN-TIMES

# Youths seek edge for college prep test

**COURSE OFFERED | Parents pay tutors \$100 an hour**

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With between 20 and 36 applicants vying for each seat at Chicago's top college preparatory public high schools, parents are leaving nothing to chance.

They're paying private tutors more than \$100 an hour to help their kids get in. And for the first time, a new test prep company is running an eight-week course that primes kids for the standardized entrance exam students must beat to get into one of the city's eight "selective enrollment" college preps.

In the next two months, more than 11,000 eighth-graders are expected to take the test.

This fall SelectivePrep signed up 300 eighth-graders for an eight-week course covering the math, reading and language arts skills on the test. SelectivePrep, which launched last year and charges \$350 to \$395 per course, also has a class for seventh-graders — scores on seventh-grade standardized tests are a factor in getting into the college preps. The other factors are seventh-grade attendance and grades.

"I was looking for any edge we could get," said Charlotte Delatorre. Her son attends St. Tarcissus on the Northwest Side and took the course.

## 'This is insane'

Many kids still take the test cold. And several principals insisted the best preparation was simply being a good student. But more and more, parents are looking for extra help.

Besides SelectivePrep, kids are using private tutors for three months or more, studying test prep books or trying established tutoring companies, such as Kumon and Huntington, for general test-taking strategies and to work on math and reading skills.

"Parents had warned me that they figure college will be a breeze after this process," said Janet Hieshetter. Her son goes to the Baker Demonstration School in Wilmette and took the SelectivePrep course. "I thought they were joking, but this is insane."

Hieshetter said parents arrived hours early

for college prep open houses this fall. One hour and 15 minutes before the Payton open house, the line was down the block, she said. In seventh grade, scores of kids came to school sick to keep up their attendance record, parents said.

The mania is driven by supply and demand: Last year, 11,500 kids applied for 2,500 freshman spots at the college preps, which include the three highest-scoring high schools in Illinois — Northside, Payton and Whitney Young, according to a Chicago Sun-Times analysis. Each student can apply to up to four schools.

The average score accepted on the 1,000-point admission scale at these schools has soared over the last five years. At Northside, it rose from 850 to 968. At Lindblom, the easiest college prep to get into last year, it rose from 600 to 828.

## What about kids who can't afford it?

Some SelectivePrep parents fear they may be fueling the frenzy.

"It can make you feel if you don't prepare, you can't compete," said Kate Schick. Her daughter goes to Burley, a CPS school in Lake View, and took the SelectivePrep course.

Added Amy Dominguez, guidance counselor at Hawthorne, a CPS magnet school in Lake View: "Kids can get filled with anxiety if you make too much of [the exam]. I'm not saying preparation is bad, but you don't want to make it to the point where it's more of an anxiety-provoking situation."

Some parents and school staff also worry about kids who can't afford tutors and prep programs.

The founders of SelectivePrep said they tried to make the course as affordable as possible — comparable programs in New York City cost \$900.

"I see us providing a good, relatively inexpensive alternative to what kids have been doing forever," said Matthew Greenberg of SelectivePrep.

And so far, their clients aren't complaining.

"At first, I thought \$400 was a ton of money," said Lisa Dandrea, whose son attends a gifted program at CPS' Beaubien School. "But now I think it's worth it. . . . You want to give your kid the best chance you can."

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