

Special CER Back-to-School Bulletin: The 2002 SAT Scores

American children have begun going back to school, and with the advent of this important ritual, CER is taking a close look at key issues facing education. This week, a look at the SAT scores and a question: does it mean anything anymore? But first, a little test, using the analogy mode that has been one of the major predictors of reasoning ability on the SAT (and next year will be removed):

SAT is to standards what Enron is to:

- A: corporate ethics
- B: politics
- C: education
- D: achievement

If your answer was A, you're right. For all the fanfare that the SAT scores release for 2002 will receive in the media tomorrow, the real story is that the SATs have undergone a demise that renders their results nearly meaningless.

The SAT has undergone extensive restructuring over the last seven years, such as:

- * Recentering of scores to make the mean score the midpoint at 500, rather than accept student performance wherever it should fall;
- * Additional time provided to complete the math portions and permitting the use of calculators (which might have something to do with modest increases over the years!)
- * Removal of the challenging antonym sections
- * Removing or changing questions that were condescendingly thought to be challenging to some students based on gender or race.

Even using the College Board's own recentered scores, the long term trend shows that since 1967, math scores have remained flat while verbal scores have dropped 39 points.

This year's results also provide evidence of grade inflation in the schools, a trend that has been noticed in the past as well. Forty-one percent of the students who took the SAT reported having an "A-minus" average or above, a ten percent increase from 1992. While the number of test-takers claiming to be among these top-scoring students has grown over the last decade, their

SAT scores have dropped. In 1992, the students reporting having an A+ average represented 4 percent of test takers and averaged 619 on verbal and 629 on math. This year 7 percent report an A+ average. They scored 607 on verbal and 626 on math. This equates to a 10-point drop in their average combined scores.

The College Board data shows that this year the number of minority students taking the SAT is at an all time high, but the achievement gap continues to widen. Over the past 10 years, minority students' scores have seen modest increases, but have improved at a slower pace than their White counterparts, increasing the gap. The overall achievement gap is at 203 points, and shows a significant widening of the gap since 1992's 187-point difference.

Recognizing that the SAT itself suffers from a bad case of grade inflation, colleges and universities have begun to look at other standards to judge prospective students. Once a measure of high standards, the SAT has now become a reflection of what exists, not of what should be.

So what will the College Board do to address the problems that plague its test? It appears there will be more dumbing down, not less. Next year's test will lose the analogy section, but will introduce essay writing and will introduce a new section called the "Critical Reading Test." State-based tests with similar sections have been at best problematic to score objectively and have yielded a wide array of results.

Writing is important to be sure, and we know that student writing in all grades is deficient. One probable reason is that most schools do not even teach grammar or sentence construction anymore. Unfortunately, since they began restructuring the SAT the College Board has shown that it is incapable of raising standards, so adding writing and more subjective assessment to the SAT calls for alarm, not "Amen!"

With all the expense and time that families spend every year to prep for the SAT, it's a shame that we can't expect more from this once prestigious, educationally-rigorous exam.

FACTS:

2002 SAT scores: Math: 516; Verbal 504. Breakdown by race, gender, geography, etc are available at <http://www.collegeboard.com/>.

Next week: What lies ahead for charter schools as they start the new year?

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