



SAT SCORES SUFFER BIGGEST DROP IN 30 YEARS

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The SAT scores of the class of 2006 dropped significantly from the previous year, raising questions about the test's new format and its rising cost.

Combined critical reading and math skills fell 7 points on average to 1,021, according to the nonprofit College Board, which runs the test.

The average critical reading score fell from 508 to 503, while math dropped from 520 to 518. The change may seem small, but it's the largest decline for verbal since 1975 and for math since 1978.

On the new SAT writing section, the class scored 497 on average, with girls scoring 11 points higher than boys. Boys performed slightly better on math and critical reading.

Test fatigue?

Initially, educators wondered if students were tiring out by the end of the marathon exam. The new test takes an average of three hours and 45 minutes to complete, not counting breaks, up from three hours.

But fatigue from the longer time period was not to blame, according to the College Board. Analysis of 700,000 critical reading and math exams taken in the spring and fall of 2005 showed students were performing about the same early and late in the exam.

Instead, the College Board said the drop was due to fewer students taking the exam a second time, which typically boosts scores 30 points. One reason could be that the price of the test has risen from \$28 to \$41, though fees are sometimes waived. Another reason could be that students were afraid to take the new test again, according the College Board.

Testing experts say the change in exams may have made students nervous and affected student performance.

"When a new test is introduced, students usually vary their test-taking behavior in a variety of ways and this affects scores," College Board President Gaston Caperton said in a news release.

Colleges concerned by lower scores

Earlier in the year, colleges expressed concern about the lower SAT scores for the class of 2006.

"When you don't know whether it's your observed facts or your instruments, you're really out there on your own," Barmak Nassirian of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers told Bloomberg News.

The College Board had assured universities that while revising and shortening the math and verbal sections to make room for the new writing section, they would maintain the same scale, Nassirian said. The decline, in addition to last year's scoring errors on over 4,000 tests due to moisture at the processing center, raises serious questions, he said.

"The burden, frankly, is on [the College Board] to establish that the instrument is rock-solid, and that what they're measuring is not internal noise to the test," Nassirian said.

SAT vs. ACT

First administered in 1926, the SAT is the nation's most popular standardized college admissions test.

However, more and more students are taking the rival ACT, which generally focuses on material covered in high school classes as opposed to the SAT's focus on general ability.

Ironically, ACT scores for the class of 2006 were up over a point this year -- to 21.1 out of 36 points -- the biggest increase in 20 years.

While the SAT has traditionally dominated the East Coast and West Coast for decades, the ACT is taken by students in the Midwest and parts of the South, though most colleges accept scores from either test.

In recent years, students in traditional SAT states like Connecticut and New Jersey appear to be taking both exams to try to improve their applications to selective colleges.

About 1.5 million of this year's 3 million high school graduates took the SAT. About 1.2 million took the ACT.

-- *Compiled by Leah Clapman for NewsHour Extra*

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