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College Test Preparation for Low-Income Students

Ensuring equal access to higher education is essential in today's economy, when advanced education is so often the key to economic success. For many low-income students, however, admissions tests remain a stumbling block. Low-income students tend to score lower on admissions tests like the SAT and ACT, and they do not have the same access to quality test preparation programs as their wealthier classmates. The College Test Preparation for Low-Income Students initiative will provide funding to pay the costs of rigorous preparation programs, including on-site programs, online programs, PC-based systems, and course materials for low-income students. Competitive grants would be given to local educational agencies or schools, which would be expected to establish partnerships with test preparation companies or community-based organizations with proven track records, including an established curriculum, for preparation services. Students would be eligible for the program if they had a family income no greater than 200 percent of the poverty line and had demonstrated a commitment and level of achievement necessary for college entrance. For example, applicants could require students to have satisfied minimum college entrance requirements. A competitive priority would be given to applicants that couple test preparation with other relevant services such as college counseling, application assistance, and financial aid counseling. The request for FY 2001 is \$10 million.

Closing the Achievement Gap: College Tests Preparation for Low-Income Students

Providing Free, High Quality Test Preparation Courses to High Need Students

Summary

SAT scores are an important component of college admission and historically, minority and low income students have not scored as well as their white and more affluent classmates for many reasons including not having access to high-quality test preparation activities that are common in many communities. There is a federal role to help solve this problem by providing funds to increase access to college entrance exam preparation. Under the model we are proposing, partnerships of high schools, leaders in the test prep industry and community based organizations would compete for a grant to offer college test preparation as well as other related services.

Background/Rationale

Because every child deserves an equal chance at academic success and because standardized testing is a fixture on the educational landscape, each student regardless of economic standing should have equal, high quality training and preparation for college entrance exams. Quality test preparation courses are important to success on college exams but are often beyond the financial reach of most families adding to the disadvantages many financially needy students face when competing with privileged students in college admissions. Free and low cost college test preparation courses meets a need of students with college aspiration, who have demonstrated through coursework that they are capable of succeeding in college.

While this program should be aimed at low-income students, by default through this criteria, it will target minority students.

Data from The College Board 1994 report indicates the following relationship between SAT scores and income:

Over \$70,000	1000
\$60,000-\$70,000	948
\$50,000-\$60,000	929
\$40,000-\$50,000	911
\$30,000-\$40,000	885
\$20,000-\$30,000	856
\$10,000-\$20,000	812
under \$10,000	766

The College Board report *Reaching the Top: A Report of the National Task Force on Minority High Achievement* found that:

- In 1995, African-Americans, Latino's and Native American's accounted for only 13% of the bachelor's degrees, 11% of professional degrees and 6% of doctoral degrees awarded by U.S. Colleges and Universities despite making up about 30% of the under 18 population.

- This year, African-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans made up only about one in twenty of the students who had very high scores on the SAT, which are scores typical of students admitted to highly selective colleges and universities.

One of the College Board's recommendations for action is for national and community organizations concerned with improving minority education to work with educational reformers and researchers to expand and strengthen supplementary education opportunities available to underrepresented students. The objective should be to provide the same education opportunities for underrepresented minorities that are equivalent in scope and quality available to many youngsters from the nation's most academically successful groups.

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Recently, the NAACP also highlighted this issue as an emerging problem and called for increasing access to test preparation services for disadvantaged students.

Last year California State Senator Hayden introduced the College Preparation Partnership Program in California that offers very low cost or free college test preparation courses. Districts were able to apply for money and choose which schools would receive the funds that met the eligibility criteria. In California, schools that receive money for college exam prep are able to use the money either to contract with an unspecified college prep service, or to use the money to train the teaching staff to do the college exam prep instruction.

DPC Proposal

Key Components

The Federal government will offer leadership and resources for communities to create partnerships to increase access to test preparation programs for disadvantaged students. This program would be run under the High School Reform package

Partnerships

The program would require the high school to partner with a test preparation program with a proven track record and established curriculum with an option to add least one community based organization. Commercial test preparation companies involved would have to demonstrate an established curriculum and have a proven track record. Programs would have to offer a minimum of 25 hours of instruction over no less than 4 weeks to ensure rigor and quality and discourage one-time preparation activities which research shows are ineffective.

Eligibility

This initiative would offer competitive grants to high schools or LEA's based on the California model. Grants would be given to schools would be those with a low college attendance rate, high numbers of low-income pupils, and demonstrated school-based efforts to improve the school's college preparatory curriculum and college attendance rates. Eligible students would receive the free college test prep courses through traditional methods as well as on-line courses. Students in the top 50% of their class who fall under 200% of the poverty line would be eligible.

Priority

A competitive priority would be given to schools that couple test preparation with other relevant services including counseling, college application and financial aid assistance.

Cost

- 300,000 students currently eligible for TRIO Talent Search services
- Assuming a cost of up to \$400 per student
- 50% match required from non-school partners with a 25% in-kind allowance

Critiques

Issue

The President's Initiative on Race asked the Department of Education to do a study on the usefulness of college test preparation. The final analysis of the report showed that there was no reason to expand funding to include college test prep, but that expanding the AP program would be more effective. The data showed that minority students are more likely to prepare for the SAT or ACT than whites and middle-income students.

Response

The study concluded that because non-white, low-income students had similar rates of test preparation, it is unnecessary to put any money into subsidized test preparation, but rather that funding should be focused on expanding the AP program (which is not surprising considering the Department runs the AP program). However, the study failed to control the methods of college preparation and quality of instruction. For example, a student might be getting tutoring for reading and could count this as college test preparation. Because the crucial issue of quality is not addressed in the study, we do not think that the study is conclusive.

Issue

Teacher unions could object that this proposal because unlike the California model which allows grant funds to be used to train the current teaching staff to be college test prep instructors, doesn't provide for this. This proposal would not allow funds to be used to train teachers as

instructors in order to ensure that students are receiving the high quality test preparation through established providers.

Response

Providing high quality test preparation is a key to the success of this grant. We want to fund what works and has proven results with research to prove their effectiveness. Training teachers is a bigger risk in terms of quality control.

Political Considerations

1. This proposal supports the Administration's position on affirmative action programs that expand opportunities for minorities and support states that are developing innovative ways to reach the goal of equality in education.
2. The NAACP has been working to reduce the weight of the SAT and ACT on college admissions, but is strongly in favor of state subsidized college test preparation courses. They are working closely with Senator Hayden's office in California and are reaching out to states and are generating momentum on this issue. So far they have found states and schools to be very receptive to the idea and there is growing interest in the California model.

OPTION 2

This program could be rolled into the High School Reform package.