

SAT scores rise, but critics call tests 'ruined'

College Board defends quality

By Carol Innerst
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

National scores on the revamped and "recentered" SAT rose for the second consecutive year, but critics of the college admission test say the scores now amount to little more than a "rubbery yardstick."

The average score on the two-part Scholastic Assessment Tests, taken annually by more than a million high school seniors, rose 3 points to 1,013 out of a possible 1,600, the College Board announced yesterday.

But last year, test makers hacked out the toughest vocabulary test — the dreaded antonyms — and allowed students to use calculators in the math portion of the test. And before this year's test, they "recentered" the average, which involved adding points to scores on the verbal and math sections to raise the averages to 500.

"The SAT has been ruined as a barometer of educational achievement in America," said Chester E. Finn Jr., former assistant secretary of education in the Reagan administration and now John M. Olin Fellow at the Hudson Institute.

"You can't use this for any serious, long-term comparison anymore and it's a damn shame. It was the only measure that went back to

the mid-'60s with an unchanged scale or standard, and that's why people liked to use it to monitor progress."

Steadfastly denying that the improved scores are the result of an easier test, College Board President Donald M. Stewart declared: "Hard work pays off in school as anywhere else and these students clearly show that the harder you work, the better you do in school and on the SAT."

And Gretchen W. Rigol, executive director of admissions and guidance services for the College Board, said there is no reason to believe changes to the test in the

1996 SAT AVERAGES

Scores rose over last year for members of the class of 1996 who took the revised and "recentered" Scholastic Assessment Tests.

	Verbal	Math	Total
All test takers	505 (+ 1)	508 (+ 2)	1013 (+ 3)
Males	507 (+ 2)	527 (+ 2)	1034 (+ 4)
Females	503 (+ 1)	492 (+ 2)	995 (+ 3)
Asian-Americans	496 (+ 4)	558 (+ 3)	1054 (+ 7)
Whites	526 (+ 1)	523 (+ 2)	1049 (+ 3)
Native Americans	483 (+ 3)	477 (+ 1)	960 (+ 4)
Latin Americans	465 (even)	466 (-2)	931 (-2)
Mexican-Americans	455 (+ 2)	459 (+ 1)	914 (+ 3)
Puerto Ricans	452 (+ 4)	445 (+ 1)	897 (+ 5)
Blacks	434 (+ 2)	422 (even)	856 (+ 2)
Other	511 (+ 4)	512 (+ 2)	1023 (+ 6)
District of Columbia	489 (+ 4)	473 (+ 2)	962 (+ 6)
Maryland	507 (+ 1)	504 (+ 1)	1011 (+ 2)
Virginia	507 (+ 3)	496 (+ 2)	1003 (+ 5)

Source: College Board

last two years have led to higher scores this year.

"We really took great pains to equate the test," Mrs. Rigol said. "When we introduced the new test in 1994, we wanted scores to be comparable that year, but we made content changes so even though we did the equating, we theorized that the higher scoring students were better able to demonstrate their abilities on the new test, which allowed, for example, use of calculators."

"There were no test changes this year," she said. "Kids are studying more and taking more courses."

Still, critics say the worth of the test — especially its longevity as the primary gauge of college-bound seniors — is all but lost.

"Only statisticians could begin to fathom what's been done to it, and they probably can't be trusted," Mr. Finn said. "Too many parts have been removed simultaneously to assume it's the same vehicle. Maybe they'll renorm it again if scores start falling."

"How can we trust this now?" he asked. "It's like a rubbery yardstick."

David W. Murray, director of research at the nonprofit Statistical Assessment Service in Washington, has written an article on the subject in the summer issue of *Academic Questions*, the journal of the National Association of Scholars.

"In the case of the SAT, we are resetting the 'currency' after 30 years of measurement," he writes. "But under this scenario, does anybody really lose? Yes — just as with baseball, there is no higher score to hit past 800, while those hitting 424 suddenly find that they, too, are scoring homers."

Gerald W. Bracey, a Washington-based research psychologist and education policy analyst, is more worried about the perceived devaluation of the test.

"There is continuity and convertibility and I'm not concerned in the abstract that the types of questions have been changed somewhat. I'm glad any time test scores are going up, but I wouldn't make much of them."

SAT adjustment

continued...

Averages by state

The average scores and the percentage of graduates taking the SAT in 1996.

State	Verbal	Math	%
Ala.	585	558	8%
Alaska	521	513	47%
Ariz.	525	521	28%
Ark.	566	550	6%
Calif.	495	511	45%
Colo.	536	538	30%
Conn.	507	504	72%
Del.	508	495	66%
D.C.	489	473	50%
Fla.	498	496	48%
Ga.	484	477	63%
Hawaii	485	510	54%
Idaho	543	536	15%
Ill.	564	575	14%
Ind.	494	484	52%
Iowa	590	600	5%
Kent.	549	544	12%
La.	559	550	8%
Maine	504	498	68%
Mass.	507	504	80%
Mich.	507	505	11%
Minn.	582	593	9%
Miss.	509	507	7%
Mo.	570	569	9%
Mont.	546	542	7%
Neb.	567	568	9%
Nev.	608	607	1%
N.H.	520	514	70%
N.J.	498	495	63%
N.M.	554	548	12%
N.Y.	497	499	73%
N.C.	490	486	59%
N.D.	568	569	5%
Ohio	536	535	24%
Ola.	565	557	8%
Ore.	523	521	50%
Pa.	498	492	71%
R.I.	501	491	68%
S.C.	480	474	1%
S.D.	574	568	5%
Tenn.	563	562	1%
Texas	495	500	48%
Utah	583	575	4%
Vt.	508	500	70%
Va.	507	496	68%
Wash.	519	519	47%
W.Va.	526	508	17%
Wis.	577	586	8%
Wyo.	544	544	11%

USA 505 508 41

Source: The College Board 1996.

Comparing old and new

Here's how scores on the old and new SAT tables compare. Overall, combined scores will rise about 100 points. But results vary. Officials say it's best to compare your percentile rank with others.

Old	New	
	Verbal	Math
800	800	800
790	800	800
780	800	800
770	800	790
760	800	770
750	800	760
740	800	740
730	800	730
720	790	720
710	780	700
700	760	680
690	750	680
680	740	670
670	730	660
660	720	650
650	710	650
640	700	640
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530	590	530
520	580	520
510	570	510
500	560	500
490	550	490
480	540	480
470	530	470
460	520	460
450	510	450
440	500	440
430	490	430
420	480	420
410	470	410
400	460	400
390	450	390
380	440	380
370	430	370
360	420	360
350	410	350
340	400	340
330	390	330
320	380	320
310	370	310
300	360	300
290	350	290
280	340	280
270	330	270
260	320	260
250	310	250
240	300	240
230	290	230
220	280	220
210	270	210
200	260	200

Source: The College Board

New scale scores

In table below, the SAT results have been adjusted to reflect The College Board's new scoring system.

	Verbal			Math			Comb.
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	
1972	523	523	523	527	489	508	1030
1973	523	521	522	525	489	506	1029
1974	524	520	522	524	488	506	1029
1975	515	509	512	518	479	498	1010
1976	511	505	508	520	475	497	1008
1977	509	505	507	520	474	496	1003
1978	511	503	507	517	474	494	1001
1979	509	501	505	516	473	493	998
1980	508	498	503	515	473	492	994
1981	508	496	502	516	473	492	994
1982	508	496	502	516	473	492	994
1983	508	498	503	516	474	494	997
1984	511	498	504	518	476	497	1001
1985	514	503	508	522	480	500	1009
1986	515	504	509	523	476	500	1008
1987	512	502	507	523	481	501	1008
1988	512	498	505	521	483	502	1003
1989	510	498	504	523	482	502	1003
1990	508	498	503	521	483	502	1003
1991	503	495	499	520	482	500	999
1992	504	495	499	521	484	503	1003
1993	504	497	500	524	484	503	1003
1994	504	497	500	524	484	503	1003
1995	505	502	504	525	490	508	1010
1996	505	508	506	527	492	509	1010

By DEB RIECHMANN
AP Education Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) - Today's college-bound seniors have nearly achieved the average math score rung up by students in the early 1970s, but verbal scores on the Scholastic Assessment Test still remain well below those of 25 years ago.

Yet some critics say the test is not a fair indicator of how students, especially women and minorities, will do in their first year of college. Others question the results because of recent changes in format and scoring.

Overall, the slightly higher scores reflect more students taking honors courses and classes in calculus, chemistry and physics, according to the College Board, which administers the nation's main college-entrance exam.

Test results released Thursday continue to show men outperforming women. While the women's average verbal score of 503 was only four points behind the men, their average math score of 492 trailed the male average by 35 points.

"The gap is narrowing slightly. While women are taking more science and more math courses, they haven't closed the gap yet," says Gretchen Rigol, the board's director of admission and guidance services.

More than 1 million students took the SAT this year. The average math score was 508, up from 506 in 1995 and just one point behind the 1972 average math score of 509.

The average verbal score was 505, up from 504 last year but still 25 points below the 1972 average of 530.

Christopher Cross, president of the Council for Basic Education, a Washington-based organization that advocates rigorous liberal arts education, said students are not asked to write enough - not only in English class, but in other classes too.

"Even though the (verbal) score has come back a point, I suspect we will never regain the level we achieved at the high point in 1972," Cross said.

College Board President Donald Stewart said he was puzzled about why verbal scores remained below 1970s levels. He speculated that students are watching more television, reading less and spending less time studying English.

This year's test-takers who had taken four years of English had an average verbal score of 512, while those with three years of English scored 40 points lower.

This year's scores are the first to be reported on the SAT's recentered score scale, designed to raise the average score back to 500 and make the scores more statistically sound. Comparison scores also were converted to the new scale.

But Jeanne Allen, director of the Center for Education Reform, said the SAT has been rendered useless as a barometer of college freshmen performance because of the change in scoring and 1994 revisions that gave students more time on some parts, let them use calculators and dropped testing on antonyms.

Education Secretary Richard Riley was encouraged by the upward trend of the test results.

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SCORES EDGE UPWARD, continued...

"SAT scores have come to be seen as a measure of the nation's educational health," Riley said. "This year's annual checkup: Pulse is strong, but sustained vigorous exertion required."

However, Robert Cohen, president of the New York-based Princeton Review, which coaches test-takers and sells test preparation materials for the SAT and other tests, dismissed the results.

"SAT scores don't tell us anything about American education,"

Cohen said.

Students from higher-income families often do better on the test because "the language of the SAT is upper-middle class," he said. Higher test scores might actually mean that fewer low-income students, who often are members of minorities, are taking the test because they cannot afford to go to college, he said.

College Board officials denied that the test was geared toward white students from upper-income families. They said nearly half the test-takers have parents who never earned a bachelor's degree.

However, Pamela Zappardino of the National Center for Fair and Open Testing in Cambridge, Mass., said research underscores a gender bias in the SAT. Despite earning better marks in high school and college, girls continue to receive lower SAT scores, she said.

Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, the nation's second-largest teachers' union, said: "SAT scores are up, but what's most important about the increase is that it reflects a renewed emphasis on the academic core curriculum. When students do rigorous work, they learn more."

"Over the past 10 years, more students have been taking academic courses, across all ethnic groups," Shanker said.

Sixty-nine percent of college-bound students who took the 1996 SAT were white; 11 percent were black; 9 percent were Asian, Asian-American or Pacific Islander; 8 percent were Hispanic or Latino; and 1 percent were American Indian or Alaskan native.

Since 1987:

- Black students raised their average verbal score by six points to 434 and their math score by 11 points to 422.

- Asian-Americans increased both their average verbal and math scores by 17 points, to 496 and 558, respectively.

- Puerto Rican students increased their average verbal score by 16 points to 452 and their math score by 13 points to 445.

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Scores Inch Upward, Women Close Gap On College-Entrance Test

By DEB RIECHMANN
AP Education Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) - Men still outscore women on the Scholastic Assessment Test, but women have nearly closed the gap on the verbal section of the college-entrance test and are gaining ground on the math.

Overall, 1996 college-bound students did better than last year's test-takers, according to test results released Thursday. Math scores improved to levels last seen in the early 1970s, while verbal scores remain well below those of 25 years ago.

But some critics question the results because of recent changes in format and scoring. Others claim it is not a fair indicator of how students, especially women and minorities, will do their first year in college.

More than 1 million members of the Class of 1996 took the test - a one-year increase of nearly 17,000.

The average math score was 508, up from 506 in 1995 and just one point behind the 1972 average math score of 509.

The average verbal score was 505, up from 504 last year but still 25 points below the 1972 average of 530.

While the women's average verbal score of 503 was only four points behind the men, their average math score of 492 trailed the male average by 35 points.

"The gap is narrowing slightly. While women are taking more science and more math courses, they haven't closed the gap yet," said Gretchen Rigol, director of admission and guidance services for the College Board, which administers the test.

Overall, the slightly higher scores reflect more students taking honors courses and classes in calculus, chemistry and physics, according to the board.

College Board President Donald Stewart said he was puzzled about why verbal scores remained below 1970s levels. He speculated that students are watching more television, reading less and spending less time studying English.

Another possibility is that students are not asked to write enough in any of their classes, said Christopher Cross, president of the Council for Basic Education, a Washington-based organization that advocates rigorous liberal arts education.

"Even though the (verbal) score has come back a point, I suspect we will never regain the level we achieved at the high point in 1972," Cross said.

This year's scores are the first to be reported on the SAT's recentered score scale, designed to raise the average score back to 500 and make the scores more statistically sound. Comparison scores also were converted to the new scale.

Jeanne Allen, director of the Center for Education Reform, said the SAT has been rendered useless as a barometer of college freshmen performance because of the change in scoring and 1994 revisions that gave students more time on some parts, let them use calculators and dropped testing on antonyms.

"The changes make it almost impossible for the lay person to determine whether or not children are actually doing better," Ms. Allen said.

More...

SCORES INCH UPWARD, continued...

Seppy Basili, director of pre-college programs for Kaplan Educational Centers, a New York-based test coaching company, disagreed, saying the scoring changes were statistically valid.

Last year, it was not clear whether SAT scores rose because of changes in the test format, or if students prepared more for the test, he said. Rising scores again this year confirms that students are doing more preparation and getting better marks, he said.

However, Robert Cohen, president of the New York-based Princeton

Review, which also coaches test-takers, dismissed the SAT results, saying they "don't tell us anything about American education."

Students from higher-income families often do better on the test because "the language of the SAT is upper-middle class," he said. Higher test scores might actually mean that fewer low-income students, who often are members of minorities, are taking the test because they cannot afford to go to college, he said.

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College Board officials denied that the test was geared toward white students from upper-income families. They said nearly half the test-takers have parents who never earned a bachelor's degree.

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SAT adjustment worth 100 points

By Dennis Kelly
USA TODAY

Students
gain with
'recentered'
scale —
plus better
performance

On the face of it, the scores on this year's SAT college admissions test are up a whopping 103 points over last year.

The news could lead people to think that those oft-berated American school kids finally got religion on their three R's. Maybe they wised up to Walt Whitman or aced those algorithms.

But people would be wrong — sort of. The rise in this year's SAT scores, an-

nounced Thursday at a Washington, D.C., press conference, comes almost totally from a statistical tinkering with the scoring scale.

The change gave all test takers a boost of close to 100 points on their combined scores for the verbal and math portions.

So now, for the class of 1996, the average combined score has reached 1013. Last year's score on the old scale was 910, but would have been 1010 had it been calibrated on the new scale.

Confused?

The College Board, sponsor of the SAT, has justified the move as a way to make test scores easier to understand.

Intuitively, the board argues, Americans expect average to be 500 on a test that is scored on a 200- to 800-point scale. But "average" had slipped through the years to where it hit 422 on the verbal and 475 on math in 1990.

So the College Board simply used the test takers of 1990 as the base line, moved the average performance to 500

for both tests, and recalculated other scores accordingly — a step called recentering. Students have been receiving scores on the new scoring scale since April 1995. But Thursday marked the first time scores were reported on the recentered scale on a national level.

The College Board issued tables so people can compare the new scores to the old ones, and points out that students' relative rankings, given in percentiles along with the raw score, won't change.

Maybe not, but recentering has made for an interesting year at admissions offices of the nation's most selective

schools. There's now a jam-up of great scores at the top. Consider this: 730 on the old verbal scoring scale rates a perfect 800 on the new one, even though you still missed a few questions.

In years past, the admissions staff at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., maybe saw applications from 10 to 12 students who aced the SAT with scores of 1600. Now, the number of applicants with the highest possible score has increased "tenfold," and about a third of those students were not offered admissions, says admissions dean Charles Deacon.

"That's where the pressure is going to be greatest, the kids who used to stand out at the top, and now they no longer stand out," Deacon says.

But never mind the statistical adjustment, College Board officials say: This year's results represent the best SAT performance in 22 years, another sign that U.S. students are taking a greater share of core academic courses — math, science and English among them.

"The class of '96 is better prepared for college than the class entering a decade ago, particularly in math and science," College Board president Donald M. Stewart said at the press conference Thursday.

Key findings from the test, which was taken by 1.084 million students last year (current and past scores are all given on the recentered scale, unless otherwise indicated):

► The combined score of 1013 (508 on math, 505 on verbal) was tops since 1974. SAT scores bottomed out in 1980-81 at 994. And it was that drop in part that precipitated publication of 1983's *A Nation at Risk*, a powerful call to arms about growing mediocrity in American schools that led to a decade of school reforms.

"The increased studies in math and science seem to indicate the nation is less at risk," Stewart said.

► 41% of this year's test takers had taken 20 years or more of core academic subjects. That matched last year's record, though Stewart bemoaned a drop in those taking four years of English from 88% to 84%.

"We really can't answer why" students are taking fewer English classes, says the College Board's Gretchen Rigol.

► Scores of ethnic minorities have improved but still lag behind those of whites.

Stewart, who is black and who was once president of historically black Spelman College in Atlanta, says, "Our kids too often miss" opportunities for demanding academic

courses, whether because they're in poor, inner-city schools or tracked out of courses that prepare kids for college. When minorities take equal amounts of rigorous courses, their scores are approximately equal with others, board officials say.

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SAT adjustment continued...

► Males enjoyed a 4-point climb in their combined scores, females a 3-point boost. But a significant gender gap continues.

This year, girls who took the test had spent just as many years in math courses (3.6) as boys and had an overall grade point average better than boys

(3.27 vs. 3.11), but they still scored lower in both the verbal and math tests. Rigol says girls still aren't taking enough of the most demanding math courses like calculus.

Still, Bob Schaeffer of Fair-Test, a Cambridge, Mass., group critical of most standardized testing, blasted the test's bias.

"New scores or old, the issue is why any school still requires this biased, irrelevant and flawed exam, and the confusion over recentering is sure to accelerate the trend of colleges that don't require students to submit either SAT or (rival test) ACT scores."

Others are simply angry that the SAT was recentered, a move they see as an admission that U.S. students needed an artificial boost to look smarter.

"I continue to believe that what they've done is like moving the fences in in baseball," says Diane Ravitch, senior research scholar at New York University and former assistant education secretary. "You get more home runs that way."

Columbia University president George Rupp calls recentering "an indictment. The fact that it's necessary to recenter is a direct recognition by society that the performance as a whole is not what it was when the test came out. That has called more attention to the decline on the test than any other step they might have taken."

But defenders of the change say the SAT hasn't been "normed," or centered, since 1941, when it was taken by about 10,000 students, mostly from prep schools headed to the country's top universities.

"I think it had to be done," says Bonnie Fitzpatrick, guidance director at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School, Bethesda, Md. "I think using

norms from 30 to 40 years ago is no longer significant."

Right or not, college admissions people say they've had to do a lot of explaining the last year and a half — more so to parents than to students.

"I think the youngsters have to explain to some momentarily euphoric parents what the new numbers mean just so folks don't make the mistake of thinking that a 1300 or 1200 today means the same as it did 20 years ago," says Kevin Keeley, executive director, the National Association of College Admissions Counselors.

Adds John Blackburn, admissions dean at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, "There has been an inflated sense of credentials this year — a good bit of it."

And with the scale ratcheted up, top schools are seeing more top scores than ever.

U.Va., for instance, has had 67 applicants with perfect 800 on the verbal, 88 perfect scores on math. In the past, the numbers might have been four or five perfect verbal scores, 63 top math scores.

The College Board's Bradley Quin says there were 32 combined 1600 scores last year, 545 of them this year.

Some schools say that has made it harder for them to distinguish between the best students at the high end of the scale. But all schools emphasize that the SAT has always been just one of many factors they considered, and the recentering has probably put more emphasis on those factors that always mattered most anyway.

"The fact that there were so many who presented higher scores made the other criteria — teacher recommendations, (grades), essays, the interview report — those kinds of criteria

became all the more important in helping discern what the scores meant," says Marlene Vergara-Rotner, senior admissions officer, Harvard and Radcliffe College.

Duncan Murdoch, director of undergraduate admissions at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, expects the confusion about recentering will clear up in just a couple of months and then everyone will understand that combined scores near 1000 are average.

"We always had a few folks who called us and said they could not understand how this scoring had changed," he says. "I think the next thing they'll want to figure out is how to recenter their GPA."

More...

Nationwide SAT Scores Show Modest Gains

■ **Schools:** Education leaders call results encouraging. But others say changes in scoring make comparisons tricky.

By ELAINE WOO
TIMES EDUCATION WRITER

The SAT scores of this year's college-bound seniors offered encouraging signs of continued improvement nationwide in academic performance, particularly in math, where the results hit a 24-year high.

The overall gains were modest—up two points over last year to 508 in math and one point to 505 in verbal. But education leaders and the College Board, which

administers the widely used college admissions test, hailed the increases as evidence that American high school students are taking more demanding academic courses.

The exam results show that the nation's educational health is strong, said U.S. Education Secretary Richard Riley. But "sustained vigorous exertion [is still] required," including more daily reading, more challenging course work and moderation of television viewing.

In California, the news was good on two fronts: High school students who took the test chalked up small gains, even as more students, especially minorities, opted to take the exam.

However, California students still ranked 10 points below the national average in verbal performance and lagged in the number of core academic courses that they took to graduate from high school.

"We are moving in the right direction," California Supt. of Public Instruction Delaine Eastin said, but the increases are "obviously not as much as we want."

In math, the state results were three points higher than the national average. Both sets of scores have been inching up since 1993, but experts are divided about how to interpret the rise.

Some, like San Francisco State University professor Richard Curci, said it may reflect recent efforts in schools to offer more applied math courses, which focus on real-life problem-solving.

But others contend that those changes in math instruction began too late to influence this group of test-takers and attribute the increase instead to a nationwide push to require students to take

more difficult math courses earlier in their school careers.

Some experts were skeptical that the slight boost in SAT scores nationwide is significant and suggested that educators are on "thin ice" in attributing the gains to more rigorous courses or standards.

The College Board introduced a new form of the test last year that was intended to reflect the movement in elementary and secondary education toward more problem-solving in mathematics and more emphasis on reading for meaning and understanding.

Now, students are encouraged to use calculators on the exam's math problems, for instance, and the SAT's verbal section contains longer reading passages and eliminates the much-hated antonyms section.

Robert Linn, a professor of education at the University of Colorado at Boulder who has analyzed the changes in the SAT, said the slight increase in this year's scores may be related to the amount of academic study by students, but is "hardly solid proof" that educators' efforts to push more students into core academic classes are working.

"If it continues over the course of a decade," that would be significant, he said, but this year's gains are too modest to assign great import to them. "I wouldn't get euphoric about the improvement" of one or two points, he said.

But others said the rise in scores is encouraging, especially since the pool of test-takers is growing broader, reaching far beyond the academic elite that had traditionally taken the college entrance exam.

Across the nation, more minority youngsters are seeking admission to four-year colleges and thus are taking the SAT, which is the exam of choice for 94% of colleges that rely on such measures in making admissions decisions. Almost one-third of the 2 million students who take the test today are minorities, compared to less than one-fourth in 1987.

Even more dramatic has been the change in California, where 55% of the test takers are now African American, Latino, Native American or Asian American, compared to 36% in 1985. Proportionally, the largest growth has occurred among black students, whose numbers

increased by 48%. Among other groups, the proportion taking the SAT has grown by 35% among Latinos, 59% among Native Americans and 9% among Asian Americans.

However, minority students tend to lag far behind the nation in performance on both the verbal and math portions of the exam. The only exception is Asian American students, whose math score exceeds the national average by more than 50 points.

The SAT scores of California's African American and Mexican American students were 60 to 80 points lower than the national average.

These disparities are "not surprising when you have an inequitable education system present throughout the state," said Harry Pachon, president of the Tomas Rivera Center, a nonprofit research and policy center affiliated with Claremont Graduate School.

More...

Modest Gains

continued...

"Those in inner-city schools may not have the same opportunities" as students in suburban settings to take honors or advanced placement courses. Enrollment in such courses correlates to higher

achievement on exams such as the SAT, the College Board has shown.

Among Mexican Americans, those who took 20 or more yearlong academic courses in math, English and other solid subjects had math and verbal scores on par with the national average, the College Board reported. However, only 23% of Mexican Americans took that many academic classes, compared to 44% of whites and Asian Americans.

The so-called "recentering" of the scale last year—the first since 1941—made the mean score 500 on a scale of 200 to 800. On the old scale, a mean of 450 meant above-average performance on verbal but below-average on math.

The new scale, according to the College Board, allows more legitimate comparisons between math and verbal scores.

The board maintains that the recalibration does not change historical trend lines, the difficulty level of the test, or the relative standing of students to each other.

But critics, such as Bruno Manno, a fellow at the Hudson Institute in Washington D.C. who follows education issues, disagree. Manno

faults the re-scaling for making it easier for students to attain a perfect score, and contends that the content changes render invalid comparisons of this year's scores to previous years. The new test is so different from the old version, "you're comparing apples and oranges," he said.

The College Board report also provided cause for concern on another front: The testing agency's figures on average grades of SAT test-takers suggest that grade inflation is rampant in the nation's high schools.

Those numbers showed that 35% of the students who took the exam said they had A averages in their high school course work, a 7% rise from 1987. But over the same period, SAT scores stayed flat or dipped slightly. Similar disparities have been found in other studies, including a large-scale examination last year by American College Testing, the Iowa City group that administers the ACT exam.

"We are concerned there may be some grade inflation going on," Fred Moreno of the College Board said.

Students Continue to Improve, College Board Says

By KAREN W. ARENSON

In what educators say is a sign that more rigorous courses of study in high school have started to pay off, the College Board announced yesterday that American students continued to improve their S.A.T. scores, with their math scores the best in more than two decades.

Donald Stewart, president of the College Board, called the scores, along with other evidence the board gathered, encouraging. The S.A.T.'s are considered a crucial barometer of student skills. "This seems to indicate that the nation is less at risk than it was in 1983," Mr. Stewart said, referring to the 1983 Department of Education report, "A Nation at Risk," which sharply criticized American education and prompted many reforms.

Compared to their predecessors, Mr. Stewart said, last year's class of graduating seniors — the class that is just entering college — has taken more honors courses and more calculus, chemistry, physics and other academic courses.

But their performance on the verbal part of the two-part test improved more slowly, remaining far below what it was two decades ago. Officials at the College Board and elsewhere blamed the slower progress on fewer students taking four years of high school English, more who speak English as a second language, and more time spent watching television, not reading.

Although the scores reported yesterday are the first to reflect the board's recentering of test results to reestablish 500 as the center on the scale of 200 to 800 points, the board said that it had recalculated all scores from previous years to make them comparable.

Specifically, the College Board reported, the average mathematics score last year reached its highest level since 1972, rising 2 points to 508. The average score on the verbal portion of the test rose 1 point last year to 505, but is still 25 points below the average score reached in 1972. All of the figures are for the graduating class of 1996.

The improvement in educational achievement has shown up not only in the College Board data but also on recent scores on the A.C.T. college entrance test, more commonly taken in the Midwest. The average score crept up to 20.9, from 20.8, last year.

Several educators said yesterday that the figures reflected what they have observed in classrooms. "I would say our schools are doing a much better job than they used to," said Jim Parker, research coordina-

tor for the Los Angeles County Office of Education. "Our dropout rates are down. Our graduation rates are up. The percent of kids taking advanced placement and S.A.T. exams is going up. And this is despite the fact that there are many more at-risk kids in the schools. I think educators have been taking a lot of unfair hits."

The latest attack came only last week from Bob Dole as he accepted the Republican nomination as President. He called America "the biggest education spenders and among the lowest education achievers among

More honors courses and academic subjects in high school.

the leading industrial nations."

But many educators and education experts say the criticism ignores the noticeable improvement in recent years even as schools have taken in a more diverse population, including students below the poverty line and many who do not speak English.

What is most important about the higher S.A.T. scores is that they reflect renewed emphasis on core academic subjects, said Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers and a longtime critic of schools that set lower standards for poorer children.

"This shows what should be obvious: when students do rigorous academic work, they learn more," he said.

Gerald W. Bracey, a research psychologist and education-policy analyst, sees similar gains from changes that have been put in place since 1983. "It's clear that a number of the reform efforts in the 1980's have had the effect of making people pay attention to what courses they should be taking and what they learn in those courses."

About 41 percent of graduating seniors now take the S.A.T., or Scholastic Assessment Test, and they represent about 90 percent of all seniors headed for four-year colleges. In the 1960's, when fewer students went on to college, a somewhat more elite group of students took the S.A.T., scoring higher.

Mr. Stewart said the nation's schools need to concentrate on improving education for students who do not go to college. "Many students

are still not living up to their potential, and that is the challenge," he said.

College Board officials and other educators credit the continued improvement to the increased portion of high school students taking more years of college-preparatory courses. Last year, 41 percent of test takers reported they had taken 20 or more yearlong, academic courses in high school, up from 34 percent a decade earlier.

Students also took more honors courses: 38 percent of the seniors who took the S.A.T. last year said they were taking honors courses in English and 29 percent said they were taking such courses in math, science and social science.

More..

Students Continue to Improve

continued...

The College Board said English was the only area where students had not increased their studies in recent years; the proportion of students with four or more years of study fell to 84 percent last year from 88 percent in 1987.

Seppy Basili, director of precollege programs for Kaplan Educational Centers, a test-preparation service, attributed some of the improvement in math scores but not in verbal to the money invested in improving math and science courses. "The National Science Foundation, beginning in about 1978, has pumped billions of dollars into the math and science curriculum throughout the country, but there's been nothing equivalent in terms of English," he said.

Among other factors in the poor verbal performance, he said, "kids really are not reading."

Gains in both math and verbal test scores are being registered by nearly all ethnic groups, although the average scores for most minority students are still below the average for all test takers. "As an African-American," Mr. Stewart said, "a particular concern of mine is that the number of African-Americans taking the test is still too low and their scores are still lower than the general population, and therein lies the challenge for America and the American education system."

In New York City, where about 70 percent of public-school students are black or Hispanic, a three-year-old push to make high school students take more college-preparatory courses before entering the City University of New York is producing better results. Last year, for example, 78 percent of CUNY's new four-year students passed their math diagnostic test, up from 66 percent in 1991. The percent passing the writing test jumped to 50 percent among native-English speakers, up from 33 percent in those same years.

"The initiative with the New York City public schools continues to pay great academic dividends," said CUNY chancellor W. Ann Reynolds.

A longstanding gender gap in S.A.T. performance continued last year. The difference in verbal scores remained relatively small: The average for boys was 507 (up 2 points from the previous year) and for girls 503 (up 1 point). Girls outperformed boys on the verbal test until 1971. But as a wider pool of girls began to take the S.A.T., the College Board said, their average was pulled down slightly and has remained lower than boys ever since. Girls now account for 53 percent of the test takers.

The gap in math has always existed, and last year remained at 35

points, the same as a year earlier smallest difference in more than two decades. Girls averaged 492 on the math S.A.T. last year (up 2 points from the previous year), while boys averaged 527 (also up 2 points).

Gretchen W. Rigol, executive di-

rector of admissions and guidance services for the College Board, said the growing number of girls taking college-preparatory math courses was helping to shrink the differential. "But they still have a long way to go," she said.

Scores on SAT best since 1974

By Dennis Kelly
USA TODAY

Combined scores on the SAT college admissions test edged up 3 points this year, the best performance since 1974, the College Board said Thursday.

This year's results are the first reported on a national level using a revised scale that raises the "average" score, which gives every test taker about a 100-point boost.

Even adjusting for that, however, students did better.

► Math and verbal scores totaled 1,013 for the 1 million students taking the SAT I: Reasoning Test the past year, up from 1,010 (adjusted).

► The math score climbed two points to 508, the best in 23 years. This is a direct result of more students taking more rigorous math and science courses, says Donald Stewart, College Board president.

► The verbal score edged up 1 point to 505, best since 1988, but still 25 points below 1972.

The total gain was just 3 points, but "we should be excited about the trend," says the board's Gretchen Rigol. "These are clearly trends, particularly in math, ... going in the right direction."

Students were taking more academic subjects in all areas but English, where 84% reported having four years compared to 88% last year.

Other results were mixed:

► Minority scores are up markedly since 1987. Blacks have gained 6 points on verbal to 434 and 11 on math to 422. They still lag those of whites (526 verbal, 523 math).

► The gender gap narrowed on verbal scores to 4 points (507 for males vs. 503 for females), but was 35 points in math (527 males, 492 females).

Rigol says females are taking more of the demanding math and science courses but "still have a ways to go."

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Math Scores on SAT Rise to 24-Year High; Verbal Results Lag

By a WALL STREET JOURNAL Staff Reporter

WASHINGTON — The average math score on the SAT college admissions test for this year's graduating high-school seniors rose to its highest level in 24 years, the College Board said.

The board, which administers the test, said the average math score rose two points to 508. Average verbal scores rose one point to 505 but still lag 25 points behind the 1972 verbal score of 530. Nearly 1.1 million students took the exam, called the SAT I: Reasoning Test, which is measured on a scale of 200 to 800.

Donald Stewart, the College Board's president, said he wasn't sure why verbal scores remain relatively low but said it likely was related to students not taking enough English courses. Since 1987, the percentage of students who took four or more years of English dropped from 88% to 84%, the College Board said. Students have increased the number of courses they take in math, science, history and foreign languages since 1987.

Minority students, who now make up one-third of all SAT test-takers, have shown substantial gains in the past decade, the College Board said. Asian Americans' verbal and math scores each increased 17 points since 1987, posting average math scores of 558 and verbal scores of 496 in 1996. Black students' math scores jumped 11 points to 422 since 1987, while their verbal scores increased six points to 434.

Both women and men made small gains on the test during the past year. Women's math scores rose two points, to 492, while their verbal scores increased one point to 503. Men's average math and verbal scores rose two points each, with average math scores of 527 and average verbal scores of 507.