SAT scores drop, despite focus on writing
Bright spot for observers: This year's test-takers were more diverse than ever

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The average scores of high school seniors on the SAT college entrance exam declined slightly this past school year in all three categories tested--critical reading, mathematics, and writing. But the drop in average scores was tempered by what some observers took as encouraging news: This year's group of test-takers was the largest and most diverse on record, and educators say the addition of a writing portion on the exam has led to more emphasis on writing in their classrooms.

The results, which the not-for-profit College Board released this morning at a Washington, D.C., press conference, pointed to the continuation of a recent reversal in test-score gains that seemed to have started in the middle 1990s and then peaked, at least temporarily, about two or three years ago.

On a scale of 200 to 800 points, average reading scores this year were down to 502 from 503, while math scores fell to 515 from 518. Mean scores on the writing test, which was first offered in 2006, dropped to 494 from 497.

The latest data emerged, however, in the context of some encouraging findings about the overall makeup of the test-taking group, as well as a reported increase in what the College Board called a developing “focus on writing in the classroom.”

Nearly 1.5 million members of the class of 2007, the largest and most diverse group of SAT takers on record, took the exam this past year, the organization said, with minority students accounting for 39 percent of the total. Twenty-four percent of all the test-takers did not use English exclusively as their first language, compared with 17 percent in 1997 and 13 percent a decade before that.

Meanwhile, in an indication of growing financial need, the number of students who received fee waivers for the tests has risen 31 percent during the past two years.

The College Board released its findings less than a week after announcing the terms of a proposed settlement with students who were affected by scoring errors from the 2005 exams. More than 4,400 students who received incorrect scores on 2005 SAT exams could get a share of $2.85 million under the proposal.
Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board, said the record number of test-takers, along with their diversity, “means that an increasing number of students in this country are recognizing the importance of a college education and are taking the necessary steps to get there.”

On the writing front, the College Board said a nationwide survey it had conducted of nearly 5,000 school teachers and 800 administrators showed that the introduction of the SAT writing section in 2006 has contributed to an increase in attention to writing in the classroom.

According to the board, 68 percent of those canvassed said the existence of the writing section had been “a factor in changing writing priorities, attitudes, and expectations,” and 61 percent said the section had contributed to “changing the overall importance placed on writing.” A smaller proportion—53 percent—saw the section playing a role in “changing learning related to writing.”

At the same time, however, the survey suggested relatively weak follow-through in terms of resources allocated to writing and time devoted to grading assignments. Among teachers, 34 percent said resources for writing had increased over the last three years, and only 7 percent pointed to more time for grading assignments. In comparison, 55 percent of administrators cited increased resources, and 13 percent reported more time for grading.

The latest SAT results showed that college-bound seniors who reported taking English composition during high school had mean writing scores of 521, or 27 points above the general average.

As they have in the past, male students taking the SAT this past year noticeably outscores female students in math—averaging 533, compared with a female average of 499. Males also did slightly better in critical reading, averaging 504 compared with 502 for females. In writing, however, females’ scores averaged 500, versus 489 for males. Females made up 54 percent of all SAT takers.

Robert Schaeffer, public education director of FairTest and an often critical observer of the testing scene, said the SAT was less flexible, more expensive, and longer than college admissions exams produced by College Board rival ACT Inc. He pointed to a much larger increase in the number of ACT test-takers over the past two years than in SAT takers.

Shaeffer commented: “When students take the SAT, they’re fatigued; they see it as a marathon. The ACT is more consumer-friendly.”

**Links:**

[The College Board](#)

[FairTest](#)

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