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STANDARDIZED EDUCATIONAL TEST SCORES
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The Congressional Research Service receives numerous requests for information concerning standardized educational test scores of specific States and local communities. Standardized test scores typically are compiled only by the schools or school districts that administer the exams; in general, they can be obtained only by contacting school officials in each locality. Of increasing concern are the nationwide average scores on both the American College Test (ACT) and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT).

This Info Pack provides basic information and background on standardized educational tests. Statistical material is included to reflect the most recent results of those who have taken these tests who intend to go to college.

Additional information on this subject, primarily in newspapers and periodicals, may be found in a local library through the use of indexes such as the Education Index, Public Affairs Information Service (PAIS), Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature, and the New York Times Index.

Members of Congress who want additional information may contact CRS at 287-5700.

We hope this information is useful.

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STANDARDIZED EDUCATIONAL TEST SCORES

The Congressional Research Service receives numerous requests for standardized educational test scores of specific States and local communities. With one exception, we are unable to provide such data. Standardized test scores typically are compiled only by the schools or school districts that administer the exams; in general, they can be obtained only by contacting school officials in each locality. While some school officials regularly provide test score data to the public (sometimes local newspapers publish them), others regard the scores as confidential and not for release. Where scores are available, normally school officials provide only averages or other group measures; they do not divulge scores of individual students except to parents or guardians.

At the present time, 44 States and the Districts of Columbia have some kind of statewide testing program in which all or most public school students in certain grades normally participate. (A list of these programs is attached.) In some States, students must attain at least a specified minimum score in order to be promoted or to graduate; in others, student scores are used only to diagnose strengths and weaknesses. While a number of States have developed their own tests for these assessments, reflecting their own priorities and curricula, others use one of several widely-administered exams such as the California Achievement Test or the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Information about these tests can be obtained by writing to State departments of education. (The names and addresses of these agencies are attached.)

In the United States, students applying to college frequently are asked to take either the American College Test (ACT), sponsored and administered by the American College Testing Program of Iowa City, Iowa, or the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) sponsored by the College Entrance Examination Board of New York City and administered by the Educational Testing Service of Princeton, New Jersey. The national mean (that is, average) scores for these exams are released annually. (Attached are tables showing the respective national means for the ACT since the 1969-1970 testing year and for the SAT since the 1951-1952 testing year.)

Recently, Educational Testing Service has begun releasing State mean SAT scores. (A copy of the latter for the 1982-83 testing year is attached.) To obtain State mean ACT scores, one must contact the appropriate State department of education. To obtain school district or individual school mean ACT or SAT scores, one must contact local school officials. Local district or individual school scores are not always available.

It is not clear what inferences, if any, can legitimately be drawn from the State SAT score means. The proportion of high school seniors taking the SAT or ACT varies so much from State to State (as does the proportion of children completing high school) that comparisons among States may be deceptive. For similar reasons, comparisons of ACT or SAT scores among school districts or individual schools may be misleading.

Care must also be taken in drawing inferences from State SAT score means about variations in the quality of education among the States. The SAT is designed to measure aptitude for college study, not to measure academic

achievement; it aims to predict who will do well in college, not to identify who has learned the most in elementary and secondary school. By itself, the SAT should not be considered a good indicator of the quality of previous schooling. (Standardized achievement tests in various academic subjects are also sponsored by the College Entrance Examination Board and administered by the Educational Testing Service. While these exams do measure the quality of academic preparation, they are taken by relatively few students who are not representative of college applicants, let alone of high school seniors in general.)

One nationally administered examination that can be used to help assess the quality of American elementary and secondary education is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a congressionally authorized series of tests for 9-year olds, 13-year olds, 17-year olds, and young adults in reading, mathematics, science, social studies, writing, and other subjects. Test results are available for a number of different student characteristics such as sex, race, parents' education, and type and size of community; they also are available both for the country as a whole and for four regional divisions. NAEP results are not available by State, school district, or individual school. (Attached is a paper summarizing trends in NAEP results in reading, science, and mathematics.) Further information about the results of NAEP tests may be obtained by writing the National Assessment of Educational Progress, P.O. Box 2923, Princeton, New Jersey, 08541.

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AMERICAN COLLEGE TEST (ACT) AND SCHOLASTIC APTITUDE TEST (SAT) NATIONAL MEAN SCORES

Table 1 on the next page shows the estimated national mean (average) scores on the American College Test (ACT), a four-part multiple-choice exam designed to measure academic abilities students will need in postsecondary education. Students are measured in each part on the basis of the number of answers they get correct on scales of 1 to 33 (English), 1 to 36 (mathematical), 1 to 34 (social studies), and 1 to 35 (natural sciences); they also receive a composite score on a scale of 1 to 35. Candidates with high scores, such as 25, are generally considered to be more likely to have academic success in college than are candidates with low scores, such as 12. College officials use test results not only for deciding who should be admitted but also for guidance and placement.

The ACT is one of several postsecondary assessment exams sponsored and administered by the American College Testing Program, a private nonprofit organization.

Table 1

American College Test Score National Means 1/
1969-1970 to 1982-83

Academic year	English	Math	Social Studies	National Sciences	Composite
1969-1970	18.5	20.0	19.7	20.8	19.9
1972-73	18.1	19.1	18.3	20.8	19.2
1973-74	17.9	18.3	18.1	20.8	18.9
1974-75	17.7	17.6	17.4	21.1	18.6
1975-76	17.5	17.5	17.0	20.8	18.3
1976-77	17.7	17.4	17.3	20.9	18.4
1977-78	17.9	17.5	17.1	20.9	18.5
1978-79	17.9	17.5	17.2	21.1	18.6
1979-1980	17.9	17.4	17.2	21.1	18.5
1980-81	17.8	17.3	17.2	21.0	18.5
1981-82	17.9	17.2	17.3	21.8	18.4
1982-83	17.8	16.9	17.1	20.9	18.3

1/ Source: American College Testing Program, based upon a 10 percent sample.

Table 2 on the next page shows the national mean (average) scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), a two-part examination designed to measure aptitude for college study. It consists of a verbal section and a mathematical section, each of which has multiple choice questions that test a variety of intellectual abilities. Candidates are measured on the basis of the number of answers they get correct (though to discourage guessing, a fraction of the number of incorrect answers is subtracted from the number that are correct), and are given a score for each section on a scale of 200 to 800. Candidates with high scores, such as 700, are generally considered to have greater aptitude for college work than candidates with low scores, such as 400. Test results are used by college officials primarily to help them decide who should be admitted. They also are used for placement and guidance.

The SAT is one of several postsecondary education admissions tests sponsored by the College Entrance Examination Board, a private, nonprofit association. The Educational Testing Service has responsibility for preparing, administering, and scoring the SAT.

TABLE 2. Scholastic Aptitude Test Score National Means 1/
1951-1952 to 1982-1983

Academic Year	SAT Verbal		SAT Mathematical	
	All Candidates	High School Seniors 2/	All Candidates	High School Seniors 2/
1951-52	476	--	494	--
1952-53	476	--	495	--
1953-54	472	--	490	--
1954-55	475	--	496	--
1955-56	479	--	501	--
1956-57	473	--	496	--
1957-58	472	--	496	--
1958-59	475	--	498	--
1959-1960	477	--	498	--
1960-61	474	--	495	--
1961-62	473	--	498	--
1962-63	478	--	502	--
1963-64	475	--	498	--
1964-65	473	--	496	--
1965-66	471	--	496	--
1966-67	467	466	495	492
1967-68	466	466	494	492
1968-69	462	463	491	493
1969-1970	460	460	488	488
1970-71	454	455	487	488
1971-72	450	453	482	484
1972-73	443	445	481	481
1973-74	440	444	478	480
1974-75	437	434	473	472
1975-76	429	431	470	472
1976-77	429	429	471	470
1977-78	429	429	469	468
1978-79	427	427	467	467
1979-1980	423	424	467	466
1980-81	425	424	468	466
1981-82	424	426	468	467
1982-83	423	425	467	468

1/ Source: Educational Testing Service.

2/ These scores are not available until the 1966-67 academic year. Scores for 1966-67 through 1970-71 are estimates.

March 1, 1984

DataFile

State Use Of Basic Skills Tests, 1983

State	Type of Test	Subject Areas Tested	Grades	Date Initiated	Used For Minimum Skills
Alabama	Alabama Basic Skills Test	Language Arts & Math Reading	3, 6 & 9 3 & 6	1981	YES
	California Achievement Test	Language Arts & Reading English & History Math & Science	1–6 7–12 1–12	1948	NO
Alaska	Alaska Statewide Assessment Program (Biennial—objective referenced)	Reading & Math	4 & 8	1978	
American Samoa	Curriculum Referenced Tests in English, Social Studies, Science & Math Being Developed.				
Arizona	Arizona Basic Skills Program	Language Arts & Reading English Math	1–6 7–12 1–12	1980	YES
	California Achievement Test	Reading English Math	1–6 7–12 1–12		
Arkansas	Arkansas Minimum Performance Test	Language Arts English Math	1–6 7–8 1–8	1980	YES
	Scholastic Research Associates (Not mandatory)			1980	
California	California Test of Basic Skills	Language Arts English Reading Math	6 8 6 6 & 8		YES
Connecticut	Connecticut Assessment of Educational Progress	Language Arts, Reading, Social Studies, Art, Music, Math & Science	4–8		NO
	Education Evaluation & Remedial Assistance Proficiency Exam	Reading, Language Arts & Math	9	1979	YES
Delaware	California Achievement Test	Language Arts & Reading English Math	1–6 7–8 & 11 1–8 & 11	1978–79	NO
	Assessment for Minimal Performance Requirements	Reading, Writing & Math	Usually before entrance into high school (graduation requirement)	1981	
District of Columbia	Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills	Reading, Math, Language Arts, Reference Skills, Science & Social Studies	3, 6, 9 & 11	1978	
	Criterion Referenced	Reading & Science Math English	1–6 1–6, 7, 9 & 10 7, 9 & 10	1972	YES
Florida	State Student Achievement Test	Language Arts & Reading English Math	3 & 5 8 & 11 3, 5, 8 & 11	1976	YES
Georgia	Iowa Test of Basic Skills	Language Arts Reading & Math	4 4, 8 & 10	1971–76	
	4th & 8th Grade Criterion Referenced Tests [10th grade if local education agencies (LEAs) desire]	Reading & Math	4, 8 & 10	1976	YES

State	Type of Test	Subject Areas Tested	Grades	Date Initiated	Used For Minimum Skills
Guam	Scholastic Research Associates	Language Arts Reading Social Studies & Science Math English	3 & 5 1, 3 & 5 5, 7, 9, 11 & 12 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11 & 12 7, 9, 11 & 12	1983	NO
	Criterion Referenced (locally developed)			Fall 1981	
Hawaii	Hawaii State Test of Essential Competencies	Language Arts & Reading Science History Social Studies, Art & Music Math Foreign Languages	6 6, 8 & 10 projected 6, 8, 10–12 6, 8 & 10 6, 8–12 8–12	1978	YES
	Competency-Based Measures	Language Arts, Reading, History, Social Studies, Art, Music, Math & Science	3	1981	
	Scholastic Aptitude Test, Otis-Lennon Mental Ability Test & Differential Aptitude Tests	Language Arts & Reading Math English History Foreign Languages	2, 4 & 6 2,4,6 & 8-12 8 & 10 10-12 9-12	1973	NO
Idaho	Idaho Proficiency Test (Testing Voluntary 75–80% participate)	Reading, Writing, Composition & Spelling	9	1979	YES
Indiana	Essential Skills Assessment Project (Pilot project)	Reading	Sample of 10th grade students	1982	YES
	Educational Improvement Program	Language Arts Reading English Social Studies, Math & Science	3 & 6 3 & 6 8 & 10 3, 6, 8 & 10	1978–79	
Kansas	Kansas Minimum Competency Tests	Reading & Math	2, 4, 6, 8 & 11	1979	YES
Kentucky	Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills	Reading English Math	3 & 5 7 & 10 3, 5, 7 & 10	1978	NO
Louisiana	Louisiana Basic Skills Testing Program	Language Arts, Reading & Math	2 & 3	1978	YES
Maine	Maine Assessment of Educational Progress	Language Arts & Reading English & Math Social Studies & Science	4 8 & 11 11	Early 70's	NO
Maryland	California Achievement Test	English & Math	8		
	Competency-based Prerequisites	English & Math Social Studies (Citizenship)	7 & 9 10	1985	YES
Massachusetts	Massachusetts Basic Skills	Language Arts English Math	1 or 2 & 4 or 5 7, 8 or 9 1 or 2, 4 or 5 & 8		
Michigan	Michigan Educational Assessment Program (Random Sample Testing every 4–5 years)	Reading, Math, Social Studies, Science, Music, Art & Health	4, 7 & 10		YES
Minnesota	State Assessment	Language Arts, Reading, Social Studies, Art, Music Math & Science History	4, 8 & 11 8 & 11		NO

State	Type of Test	Subject Areas Tested	Grades	Date Initiated	Used For Minimum Skills
Mississippi	California Achievement Test	Language Arts Reading & Math History & English	4 & 6 4, 6 & 8 8	1971	YES
Missouri	Missouri Essential Skills Test	English, Social Studies & Math	8	1978–79	YES
	Test of Achievement and Proficiency	English, History, Social Studies, Math & Science	9 & 12	1970s	NO
	Missouri Assessment	Language Arts Reading English & History Social Studies, Art, Music, Math & Science	6 1, 4 & 6 12 6 & 12	1975–76	NO
Montana	Montana Testing Service (Battery of tests offered—LEA participation voluntary)			1975	NO
Nebraska	Nebraska Assessment (Battery of Learning Skills—LEA requests tests)			1975	
Nevada	Nevada Proficiency Exam	English & Math	9 & 11	1978	YES
	Stanford Achievement Test	Language Arts, Reading & Math	3 & 6	1978	
New Hampshire	Periodic Assessments	Language Arts & Reading History, Social Studies & Math English	5 5, 9 & 11 9 & 11	1978 & 1980	NO
New Jersey	Minimum Basic Skills Test	Writing, Reading & Math	3, 6 & 9	1978	YES
New Mexico	New Mexico High School Proficiency Exam	English, Social Studies & Math	10	1977	YES
	Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills	Language Arts & Reading History, Social Studies, Math & Science English	5 5 & 8 8	1972	NO
New York	Math Competency	Math	any year 9–12	1974–79	YES
	Preliminary Competency Test in Writing	Writing	8 or 9	1979	YES
	Regents Competency in Writing	Writing	11	1980	YES
	Writing Test for Elementary Schools	Writing	5	1983	YES
	Degrees of Reading Power	Reading	3, 6, 8 or 9 & 11	1974–80	YES
North Carolina	North Carolina Competency Test	English & Math	11	1978	YES
	Prescriptive Reading Inventory	Reading	1 & 2	1978	YES
	Diagnostic Mathematics Inventory	Math	1 & 2	1978	YES
	California Achivement Test	English Reading Math	9 3 & 6 3, 6 & 9		
North Dakota	Iowa Test of Basic Skills & Scholastic Research Associates			1963	
Northern Mariana Islands	California Achievement Test	Math	1–3 & 9–12	1980	YES
	Publisher of Textbook Program Test	Social Studies & Science	1–12	1981	YES
	Competency-based Test	Language Arts English Math	2–5 7–12 4–8		YES
Ohio	Ohio Test of Scholastic Achievement (LEAs required to test)				NO

IP0294S

State	Type of Test	Subject Areas Tested	Grades	Date Initiated	Used For Minimum Skills
Oregon	Oregon Statewide Assessment	Reading/Writing & Math Language Arts & Reading	7 & 11 4	1978 & 1982	YES
Pennsylvania	Educational Quality Assessment	Writing, History, Social Studies, Art, Music, Math & Science Reading	5, 8 & 11 5	1965	NO
Puerto Rico	Mathematics Basic Skills Test	Math	2–9		YES
	Spanish Basic Skills Test	Spanish	2–9		YES
	English Basic Skills Test	English	2–9		YES
Rhode Island	*Iowa Test of Basic Skills*	Language Arts Reading, Math & Study Skills English	4 & 6 4, 6 & 8 8	1960s	NO
	Rhode Island Life Skills Test	English, Math & Reading	10	1976	NO
South Carolina	Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills	Language Arts & Reading Social Studies, Math & Science English	4 4, 7 & 10 7 & 10	1973	YES
	Basic Skills Assessment Test	Writing Reading Math	6, 8 & 11 1, 2, 3 & 6 1, 2, 3, 6, 8 & 11		
Tennessee	Diagnostic Tests	Math, Spelling, Language Arts & Reading	4 & 5 or 6 & 8	1978	YES
	Proficiency Exams for Graduation	Language Arts, Reading & Math	11 & retake allowed in grade 12	1981	YES
Texas	Texas Assessment of Basic Skills	Reading Composition & Math	3, 5 & 9	1980	YES
Utah	Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills Forms A great variety of other measures as part of the state assessment program.	Reading, Math, Science & History	5 & 11	1975	NO
Vermont	Local Test (Must conform to criteria of competency; status of all graduating students must be reported; state does random sampling)	Language Arts & Reading English Math & Science	1–6 7–12 1–12	1977	YES
Virginia	Minimum Competency Test	Math & Reading	10, 11 & 12	1978	YES
	Scholastic Research Associates	Language Arts Reading, Social Studies, Math & Science English	4 4, 8 & 11 8 & 11	1960s	
	Basic Skills (Criterion Referenced Tests)	Language Arts, Reading & Math	1–6	1978	
Washington	California Achievement Test	Language Arts & Reading Math English	4 4, 8 & 11 8 & 11	1976	NO
	Degrees of Reading Power (One time study-sample)			1983	
West Virginia	Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills	Language Arts Reading, History, Social Studies, Math & Science English	3 & 6 3, 6, 9 & 11 9 & 11	1975–76	NO
Wisconsin	Legislation requires testing in 1985–86; tests being developed.				

*Source: Council of Chief State School Officers, **Humanities and State Education Agencies, Policies, Perspectives and Prospects***

Data File

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES, COLLEGE-BOUND SENIORS, 1981 AND MEAN SAT SCORES, 1983

State	High School[1] Graduates	College-Bound[2] Seniors	% Graduates Taking SAT	SAT Scores[3] Verbal	SAT Scores[3] Math
Alabama	48,794	3,071	6	466	508
Alaska	5,543	1,577	28	437	468
Arizona	30,216	3,141	10	465	505
Arkansas	30,677	1,295	4	482	518
California	267,072	100,131	37	421	474
Colorado	37,769	6,148	16	469	520
Connecticut	46,969	32,196	68	433	465
Delaware	8,849	4,817	54	433	467
Florida	99,155	38,008	38	423	464
Georgia	68,263	34,089	50	390	428
Hawaii	14,072	6,996	50	393	471
Idaho	12,979	879	6	479	513
Illinois	157,095	21,849	14	462	517
Indiana	78,781	37,430	47	410	454
Iowa	46,435	1,297	3	520	573
Kansas	31,197	1,605	5	498	540
Kentucky	46,114	2,987	6	475	513
Louisiana	55,499	2,813	5	469	502
Maine	17,354	8,127	47	427	464
Maryland	60,950	31,159	51	427	466
Massachusetts	87,431	58,057	66	427	463
Michigan	137,472	15,049	11	458	511
Minnesota	67,647	5,074	7	482	538
Mississippi	31,783	940	3	474	507
Missouri	67,759	7,379	11	466	510
Montana	12,134	953	8	480	535
Nebraska	24,311	1,409	6	494	546
Nevada	9,369	1,543	16	441	480
New Hampshire	13,752	8,014	58	444	481
New Jersey	107,268	70,535	66	418	455
New Mexico	18,834	1,609	8	484	519
New York	230,865	141,305	61	422	466
North Carolina	72,401	35,467	49	394	431
North Dakota	10,624	309	3	505	560
Ohio	159,203	24,799	16	458	504
Oklahoma	39,875	1,915	5	489	521
Oregon	30,329	13,034	43	432	469
Pennsylvania	170,645	87,143	51	425	461
Rhode Island	12,819	7,742	60	422	459
South Carolina	41,038	20,360	50	383	415
South Dakota	10,985	295	3	517	560
Tennessee	55,956	4,758	8	483	519
Texas	178,765	57,681	32	412	453
Utah	20,386	638	3	508	545
Vermont	7,324	4,056	55	434	472
Virginia	71,626	37,432	52	427	463
Washington	53,146	8,594	16	463	510
West Virginia	24,480	1,771	7	466	512
Wisconsin	74,743	7,442	10	473	533
Wyoming	6,361	376	6	492	530

[1]Graduates. 1981 high school graduates. Source: National Center for Education Statistics.

[2]Number of seniors, 1981, who took the SAT. If they took the test more than once, their most recent scores are counted. Source: The College Board.

[3]1983 college-bound seniors.

Source: The College Board.

IP0294S

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SATs Are Getting in the Way of Education

Who cares about high scores? The question is: Have they learned anything?

By Dan Morgan

QUESTION: The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is:

☐ A clever device used by the educational establishment to avoid its responsibilities.

☐ A hurdle of much-exaggerated importance for high school seniors trying to get into college.

☐ One symbol of what's wrong with high school education in America.

The SAT itself does not allow an answer of "all of the above," but in this case, that is the correct answer. The declining status and significance of this test is one sign that the hidebound American secondary educational system is at last undergoing some significant changes.

Old institutions die slowly, and the SAT still has a powerful mystique. It remains a tense rite of passage for nearly half of all high school seniors. Yesterday, some 267,000 filed nervously into classrooms and auditoriums around the country to agonize over its multiple choice questions about vocabulary, grammer and math.

Yet there is a growing belief among educators that the SAT is an outmoded educational instrument that is sending the wrong message, or at least an incomplete one, to the nation's high schools. In the 58 years of its existence, its creators have yet to define satisfactorily what, exactly, the SAT *tests*. It comes too late in high school careers to be much use in spotting areas where students need more help. And it does not examine how

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well kids have actually mastered high school subjects such as chemistry, Spanish, American history or geography.

One sign of changing times was a little-noticed report from Harvard College this winter. Harvard confirmed that it was considering allowing future candidates for admission to skip the SAT altogether. Instead, applicants would have the option of submitting the results of tests that evaluate their mastery, or "achievement," in five high school academic subjects.

■ ■

The new thinking about testing is part of a fundamental reevaluation of what is needed to improve the quality of American secondary education, a reevaluation that marks a clear (and controversial) break with the recent past.

Educational reformers have been urging schools to radically revamp their curriculums, to eliminate the junk courses that have accumulated in them over the past two decades, and to require all students, not just college-bound ones, to master academic subjects such as world history and science.

For that, the nation clearly will need an overhauled testing system that helps students identify their strengths and weaknesses early in the game, instead of one that sorts out the gifted (or the good test-takers) from the not-so-gifted at the end of the academic process.

The United States, alone of all major industrial countries, relies primarily on a vague concept called "aptitude" to evaluate secondary school students.

This year 1.5 million seniors will take the SAT, the nation's leading aptitude test. Defenders of the exam say it tests a student's ability to think and reason. Many of the questions certainly do that; they are abstract puzzles requiring skills that some feel are beyond the schools' ability to teach. The defenders also say the SAT does test a certain kind of verbal and mathematical achievement. But the SAT does not test knowledge of high school courses.

That is not the main purpose, either, of the American College Testing Program exam (the ACT), which 900,000 students, most of them in the Midwest, will take this year.

ACT does ask some questions about social studies and natural science, but it is similar to the SAT.

■ ■

Remarkable as it may seem, only a small minority of U.S. high school students presently take standardized, national tests that evaluate what they have actually learned in high school academic courses. In recent years, many states have adopted "minimum competency" requirements for high school diplomas, but the requirements have been set so low that almost all can pass.

There is nothing in this country comparable to the British O (for Ordinary) Level tests — the stringent three-hour, written examinations that all English 16-year-olds take in up to 10 different subjects. The O Levels, instituted in the 1950s, replaced the old elitist system of British academic selection.

Last year, only 280,000 high school seniors out of 3 million (less than 10 percent) took the achievement tests offered in 13 subjects by the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, the same company that produces the SAT. Most of those who did were candidates for elite colleges and universities that often require them. Only 86,000 (3 percent) took the ETS's achievement test in writing, which consists of a 20-minute essay. (The achievement tests are one-hour multiple-choice exams that examine knowledge of foreign language, history, English, science and math. The questions are made up after extensive consultation with high school teachers and college professors all over the country.)

■ ■

It is easy to see why the U.S. educational establishment has been loath to test what high school students have learned.

As several major reports issued in the last few months state, high school curriculums in America are a "smorgasbord." The National Commission on Excellence in Education has reported that high schools have a "cafeteria-style curriculum in which the appetizers and desserts can easily be mistaken for the main course." Only 31 percent of high school graduates complete intermediate algebra and only 16 percent finish a geography course.

In an Illinois sample, it turned out that more than 2,100 different subjects were taught in the state's high schools, and a large portion of them were non-academic. That was in 1977. Since then, economic cuts and state-ordered reforms have sharply reduced electives, but curriculums everywhere are still bloated with such courses. Large high schools typically offer 150 or more courses, including subjects such as driving, speed-reading, gourmet cuisine, bowling, office management, food services, medical careers, "tots and toddlers" (baby care), women in society, wilderness survival and whale watching.

The available evidence is not reassuring about what high school students actually do learn. In 1976, one out of seven 17-year-olds thought the president did not have to obey the law and only 12 percent were aware that plastics are petroleum products.

International comparisons are risky, given the uniquely broad bas-

of U.S. public education, but results of such comparisons have not been flattering to the United States. In one, done between 1973 and 1977, American 13-to-18-year-olds tested near the bottom of industrial countries in civics, mathematics and reading comprehension.

■ ■

Why has a schoolroom "smorgasbord," and its shoddy results, been tolerated for so long in a country that constantly boasts of its commitment to education? The answer is that the nation's educational leaders — its college deans, teachers' organizations, testing companies, high school principals and state and local authorities — have found convenient excuses to avoid taking action. They have persistently claimed that they can't agree among themselves on what students *should* know. And they have fallen back on an almost religious-sounding incantation: local authorities, not outsiders, should decide what is taught in local schools.

The SAT, with its alleged objectivity and its claim to be "curriculum free", has helped educators avoid the real issues of educational quality. For years, it provided admissions offices at elite colleges and universities with a convenient way to finesse the problem of identifying students' accomplishments, while still funneling gifted applicants to them.

Because it almost defied definition, the SAT enabled educators to duck the charge that they were dictating what schools should teach.

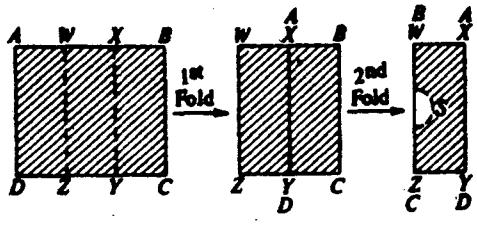
What makes recent proposals for educational reform so intriguing is that the proposals take a first stab at identifying the knowledge and skills that American students should acquire in high school. Several of the proposals call in so many words for something this country has never had: a high school curriculum, rooted in academic subjects and specific academic skills, that is generally accepted nationwide.

Last year, the College Board, a non-profit organization of 2,500 colleges, schools and school systems, issued a 36-page booklet identifying "what [college] students need to know and be able to do." It listed six academic subjects (English, the arts, mathematics, science, social studies and foreign language), and six academic "competencies" (reading, writing, speaking and listening, mathematics, reasoning, and studying). The booklet was general enough to avoid charges that the College Board was "dictating" to the schools, but it went much further than ever before in saying that there are a set of definable goals for all schools. In some areas it got specific. Under world history, it said students should not only know about the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution, but also "the spread of Islam."

The booklet was followed last summer by the release of two major reports that questioned current high school curriculums.

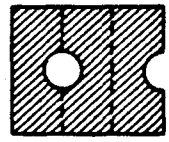
One, the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, recommended that state and local authorities require all students seeking a diploma to take four years of English, three years of mathemat-

These SAT sample questions measure "aptitude." They require an ability to reason and comprehend abstractions — qualities that some feel are difficult to teach in a classroom. Six out of 10 students get the right answer to Question 1. Slightly less than one out of 10 correctly answer Question 2. (For correct answers, see box below.) By contrast, achievement tests measure how well students have mastered specific high school subjects. History achievements ask about the dates or significance of actual events and chemistry questions may test a student's knowledge of chemical reactions. The questions are from "Taking the SAT," the College Board's guide for high school students.

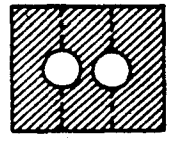


1. In the figure above, a rectangular piece of paper ABCD is folded along dotted line WZ so that A is on top of X and D is on top of Y and then folded along XY so that B is on top of W and C is on top of Z. A small semicircle S with diameter on BC is cut out of the folded paper. If the paper is unfolded, which of the answers at right could be the result?

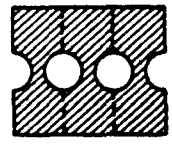
(A)



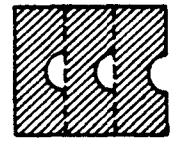
(B)



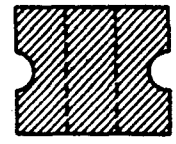
(C)



(D)



(E)



2. How many **minutes** will it take a rocket to travel 4,000 miles if its average rate is 100 miles every t seconds?

(A) $\frac{2t}{3}$ (B) $\frac{3t}{2}$ (C) $\frac{2}{3t}$ (D) $40t$ (E) $2{,}400t$

ics, three years of science, three years of social studies and one-half year of computer science.

The other was former U.S. Commissioner of Education Ernest L. Boyer's book, "High School," written for the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Boyer called for schools to establish a "core of common learning," with required courses in literature, the arts, foreign language, history, civics, sciences, mathematics, technology and health. Boyer called for an end to the tracking of students into "academic" and "general" programs. Under his plan all students would take a solid group of academic subjects.

Boyer's ideas have been attacked on grounds that they could lead to a "homogenous" system that would keep schools from tailoring curriculums to local needs. Doesn't a school in an Iowa farm community have different educational priorities and values than one serving ethnic neighborhoods in Chicago, they asked? Boyer contends that question dodges the real issue.

"If a school district is incapable of naming the things it wants high school graduates to know, if a community is unable to define the culture it wants high school graduates to inherit, if education cannot help students see relationships beyond their own personal ones, then each new generation will remain dangerously ignorant, and its capacity to live confidently and responsibly will be diminished," wrote Boyer.

For better or worse, the testing system is sure to have a major impact on whether these curriculum reform proposals get off the ground.

The SAT became a mass, nationwide test after World War II, when higher education was expanding rapidly and colleges and universities needed some uniform indicators. Initially, SAT scores were thought to be an excellent predictor of college performance. When subsequent studies questioned that assumption, the rationale for the SAT changed.

The current, more modest view of the College Board, which sponsors the test, is that it is "one helpful piece of information."

Spokesmen for some college admissions offices say SAT scores help students evaluate their own scholastic strengths, so that they can "self-select" colleges that fit those abilities. It identifies "gifted" (if high scores automatically warrant that adjective) students who otherwise might get lost in the admissions shuffle because they attend an undistinguished high school. And it provides a check on whether grades on high school transcripts accurately reflect a student's ability.

But Boyer and others suggest that the most important use of the SAT today is one for which it was never intended: as a report card on schools, not students. The decline in average SAT scores starting in 1964 has been a prime mover in calls for educational reform. And rightly or wrongly, communities often judge the quality of individual schools on how well students score on the test.

■ ■

Most colleges, and ETS itself, have come to recognize the limitations of the SAT. Nevertheless, it is still associated with academic "merit," through the Preliminary SAT (PSAT), the exam in junior year which is used to select semi-finalists for National Merit Scholarships. If anything, students, parents and schools seem more obsessed than ever with SAT results, and a whole industry has grown up around coaching students to raise their scores.

This is ironic in view of considerable evidence that SAT scores will have little bearing on whether the vast majority of high school students enter the college of their choice.

"Most private colleges in America today, including some with rather

ANSWERS:

Question 1: The answer is A.

Question 2: The answer is A.

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prestigious names, are *not* highly selective," writes Richard Moll in "Playing the College Admissions Game," a handbook for parents and students. "High price, a declining number of college-age Americans, apprehension regarding the worth of a bachelor's degree in the job market and the growth and strength of the state university system nationwide have created this phenomenon. . . . Unfortunately, many colleges pose as being more selective than they really are."

According to Moll, not more than 40 private colleges (and far fewer public ones) "enjoy the luxury of admitting one out of two of their candidates, and not more than half a dozen private colleges admit [as few as] one out of five."

Most colleges still require SAT scores, but less than 2 percent use them as the single most important criterion for admission.

"After you get beyond the first 50 or 75 most selective colleges, the problem is who *not* to admit," says Alexander Astin, director of the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California in Los Angeles. For them, the SAT is useful mainly in weeding out the very worst students (or worst test takers) — not in selecting the brightest.

■ ■

To students in the Washington area who have their hopes set on highly selective, prestige colleges such as Swarthmore, Yale or the University of Virginia, SATs are still important. But such students are in a minority nationwide.

Of this year's 1,750,000 college-bound seniors, nearly 700,000 will enter two-year colleges that, for the most part, have open enrollments. Another 400,000 will enter state universities, most of which — the Big Ten schools in the Midwest, for example — accept all applicants from their states. (The University of Wisconsin stopped requiring the test entirely in 1972.)

Another 650,000 go on to four-year colleges. Many of these do use tests and are selective; but they are not nearly as selective as many students believe.

In all, probably no more than 80,000 of next year's freshman places will be in the 100 or so institutions where the combined math and verbal scores of entering freshmen average 1,100 or better out of a possible 1,600, according to UCLA's Astin. In other words, a score of 650 on the verbals and 450 on the math would still be high enough to give a student a reasonable chance at a selective college. A combined score of 1,200 is high enough to get a student into 90 percent of the 50 most selective schools, Astin estimates.

■ ■

One concern of educators such as George Hanford, president of the College Board, is that the message of Boyer and other reformers may be misinterpreted as a call for a return to a rigid curriculum emphasizing rote and fact learning. In emphasizing achievement and mastery, he warns, we could sacrifice thinking and reasoning. And in a rapidly changing world, those two qualities will be more important than acquiring knowledge.

In Hanford's view, the SAT is a good test of those important qualities. "I worry about too much emphasis on achievement," he says.

But even if the SAT does serve some useful purposes, it seems urgently in need of major modification.

For one thing, it ignores the needs of hundreds of thousands of students who are not going on to college, but who still need guidance in planning their futures. Boyer proposes replacing the SAT with a Student Achievement and Advisement Test (SAAT), which all students would take. It would evaluate their academic achievement (not aptitude), linking it to a "core" academic curriculum. An accompanying questionnaire could collect information about their interests, goals, job history and experiences. That information could then be used to help them choose suitable academic or employment opportunities.

ETS has already begun work on a new series of diagnostic tests that teachers could use in classrooms to pinpoint students' strengths and weaknesses all through the academic year.

"We need better testing at the school level for purposes of instruction and learning," says ETS president Gregory Anrig. "Our present tests don't answer the question, 'How am I doing in progressing toward my goals?' We don't have tests that are helpful teaching tools."

A revamped testing system would create a new set of standards for schools and students. One obvious possiblity would be combining achievements and SATs, to get a more complete picture of a student's ability to reason *and* master academic subjects. Such a test could do a better job of recognizing personal qualities such as hard work, determination, curiosity and love of learning — all indispensable for doing well in academic subjects, but not necessarily for scoring high on aptitude tests.

Changes of this magnitude would face bureaucratic resistance. If implemented, there would be less need for teachers of "electives," but more demand for teachers who are really competent in their academic fields, as European and Japanese secondary school teachers tend to be.

Such reforms are bound to run into criticism that they favor students from affluent school systems blessed with gifted teachers. There is concern that raising academic standards too high might force kids out of school, especially minorities. That would defeat the purpose of U.S. public education, which has always strived to be open rather than exclusive. But it is hard to see how that could happen. It is the lack of higher education facilities, not the tests, that make European education selective. There are only 40 academic colleges in all of England, while nearly two out of three U.S. high school students go on to one of the nation's 3,000 colleges and universities.

The pressing issue for the United States is not wider access to higher education. It is the disappointing level of knowledge, academic skills and motivation of young people who feel, unjustifiably, that they have had a good education in high school.

WASHINGTON POST September 18, 1983 p. A2

Nationwide College Entrance Test Scores Show No Improvement

By Lawrence Feinberg
Washington Post Staff Writer

After rising last year for the first time in almost two decades, the nationwide average score on the Scholastic Aptitude Test remained unchanged this spring, the College Board reports today.

While last year's rise was celebrated as a possible "watershed" for American schools, the failure of this year's SAT scores to continue to advance was a disappointment to educators.

The SAT is the nation's most widely used college entrance exam, taken by almost 1 million high school seniors a year. The mathematics average on this year's exam was 468, up one point from 1982, but the verbal average fell one point to 425.

"I think the trend line seems to indicate that we've leveled off, that the slippage has stopped," said Robert G. Cameron, executive director of research and development for the College Board, which is an association of about 2,500 schools and colleges.

"I'd be a fool to predict the future," Cameron continued, "but I'm still optimistic that with all the reformers on the loose there will be some real improvement."

William J. Bennett, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, was more cautious. "Maybe you can say we're holding steady," he remarked, "but we're steady at the bottom."

In 1963, just before the scores began their slide, the nationwide SAT average was 478 on the verbal part and 502 on the mathematics part.

By 1980 and 1981, when the scores reached their lowest level, the combined average score had declined by 90 points—54 points in the verbal score and 36 points in math.

Last year, the scores rose 2 points in verbal and 1 point in math.

"After dropping so much, this is just flat," Bennett said of the last two years' results. "Nobody can say we have the problems licked."

A perfect score on each half of the two-hour multiple-choice exam is 800 points. The lowest is 200. The test is taken by about a third of all high school seniors.

In math, the exam concentrates on problem-solving, using arithmetical reasoning, algebra and geometry.

The verbal part measures reading comprehension and vocabulary.

The new report is based on SAT scores of those who graduated from high school last June.

It includes statewide figures that show combined scores on the two parts of the test up 4 points in Maryland and 2 points in Virginia.

The score for District of Columbia students in both public and private schools rose by 5 points, though it was still 67 points below the nationwide average.

The score for Maryland matched the national average, while Virginia's was 3 points below it.

The College Board said scores for D.C. public schools and other local

AVERAGE SAT SCORES

	VERBAL	MATH	TOTAL	CHANGE IN TOTAL SCORE 1982-83	1978-83	1973-83
UNITED STATES	425	468	893	0	−4	−33
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	399	427	826	+5	+39	+3
MARYLAND	427	466	893	+4	−4	−49
VIRGINIA	427	463	890	+2	0	−24

NOTE: SCORES INCLUDE BOTH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOL STUDENTS IN EACH JURISDICTION

AVERAGE SAT SCORES BY SEX NATIONWIDE

	1983			CHANGE IN VERBAL		CHANGE IN MATH	
	VERBAL	MATH	TOTAL	1982-83	1973-83	1982-83	1973-83
ALL	425	468	893	−1	−20	+1	−13
FEMALE	420	445	865	−1	−23	+2	−15
MALE	430	493	923	−1	−16	0	−9

SOURCE: COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION BOARD

The Washington Post

school systems will be available next week.

George H. Hanford, president of the College Board, said the 1-point rise in the nationwide SAT average in math "is apparently due to the improved performance of women, as the average score for women rose 2 points from 1982, while the average score for men remained the same."

Hanford said the score rise "coincides with increases in the amount of math that women report taking in high school and parallels their increasing interest in careers in such fields as business and computer science."

Even with the increase, however, the average math score for female students is 48 points below that of males. On the verbal part of the test, the average for males is 10 points ahead. Both sexes dropped 1 point on the verbal test last year.

Despite the mixed results on the test, data collected from students who take it indicate a continuing trend toward enrolling in more academic courses.

Since 1977, the average amount of study in major high school academic subjects—English, social studies, mathematics, foreign languages, and science—has increased from 15.8 to 16.3 years.

The greatest increases were in mathematics and physical science, particularly among female students, though males continue to take more courses in both subjects.

"I'm afraid we don't know what goes on in those courses," Cameron said. "We don't know how rigorous they are."

Average grades reported by high school students were unchanged for the fourth year in a row, though they are still down only slightly from the peaks of grade inflation reached in the mid-1970s.

Last year, the College Board reported that gains by blacks and other minority groups played a major role in the SAT increase, but scores for different ethnic groups on this year's test will not be published until December.

After a spurt during the 1970s, the proportion of test-takers who are black dropped slightly to 8.8 percent, down from a peak of 9.1 percent in 1980.

Asian students continued to increase rapidly, reaching 4.2 percent, more than double the 2.0 percent reported in 1975.

The proportion of students in private schools also rose, climbing from 17.5 percent to 19.7 percent since 1978.

Council of Chief State School Officers

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