

SAT scores dip for high school class of 2009

by JUSTIN POPE
AP Education Writer

Through the early 1990s and early 2000s, average scores on the SAT college entrance exam moved steadily upward. Now, for the last five years, they've been drifting back down.

The reason? Unlike on the multiple-choice sections of the test itself, there's no one right answer. But a big factor is the larger, more diverse group of students taking the tests, combined with a widening scoring gap between the best-performing groups and those whose numbers are growing fastest.

Results released Tuesday, Aug. 25, show the high school class of 2009 earned a combined score of 1509 on the three sections of the exam, down two points from last year. The average reading and writing scores dropped one point each, while math scores held steady.

Experts caution against reading too much into the national average SAT score, given the test-taking pool changes over time and can vary widely among states. Still, the average score is now down nine points since 2006, when the writing section was first included and the test moved to a combined 2400-point scale.

Math scores are higher over the last decade, but reading scores are four points below their 1999 level.

The College Board, which administers the exam, emphasized the growing diversity of SAT-takers. Minorities made up 40 percent of last year's group, and more than a quarter of the 1.5 million test-takers reported English was not their first language at home.

That's good news in that more students aspire to col-

lege, but it also weighs down the overall scores because, on average, students from most minority groups score lower.

The exception is Asian-Americans, whose average combined score surged 13 points to a combined 1623, while scores for whites fell 2 points to 1581. For black students, average scores dropped 4 points to 1276. Average scores for two of the three categories the College Board uses for identifying Hispanics also declined, and overall ranged from 1345 to 1364.

Men also widened their advantage over women by 3 points; men scored 1523 on average compared to 1496 for women. The difference comes mostly from math scores.

Students reporting their families earned over \$200,000 scored 1702, up 26 points from a year ago. That group is comparatively small, but the sharp increase could fuel further criticism the exam favors students who can afford expensive test-prep tutoring.

The SAT remains the most common college entrance exam, though the rival ACT has nearly caught up in popularity. Most colleges accept either, and a growing minority no longer requires either one.

Still, fewer than half of high school graduates take the three-hour, 45-minute SAT, and the group is tilted toward higher-achieving, college-bound students.

"I just don't think it's a good gauge of what's going on nationally," said Tom Loveless, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, who said the SAT remains a useful tool, when combined with high school GPA, for evaluating how well individual students are prepared for college.

Experts generally pay closer

attention to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, because, unlike college entrance exams, it represents the entire population of students.

On those exams, K-12 black and Hispanic students have made bigger gains than whites since the 1970s. Since 2004, they've made improvements in reading and math at every level or age tested, but the achievement gap between minority and white students has remained wide because whites have also done better.

College Board officials don't attribute the widening SAT scoring gap directly to race but to factors that correlate with race, such as the likelihood of exposure to a rigorous high school curriculum. Students taking a core curriculum—including four years of English and three each of science, social science and history—scored 44-46 points higher on each section of the SAT.

"Our data suggest the gap is widening as academic preparation widens," said Wayne Camara, the College Board's vice president of research and development.

White kids are more likely to have access to advanced college-prep subjects than blacks and Hispanics, and the success of Asian-Americans on the SAT is also probably due in part to their push to enroll in such courses.

Whatever Asian-Americans are doing, educators want to bottle it.

"For students who are planning to attend college, there's this one group that's outperforming everybody," said Seppy Basili, senior vice president at Kaplan Test Prep. "So what is it about this group? Can we do something to study it?" ■

Rights groups urge to end local immigration checks

LOS ANGELES—Immigrant and civil rights advocates are asking the Obama administration to put an end to a federal program that lets local police and sheriff's departments enforce the country's immigration laws.

More than 500 organizations signed a letter dated Tuesday urging Obama to end the program, which they claim has exacerbated racial profiling.

Immigrant rights groups have long condemned the so-called 287(g) program, which trains local law enforcement officers and lets them enforce immigration law in their jurisdictions. It also has been criticized by the Government Accountability Office and led to a Justice Department investigation of the Maricopa County, Ariz., sheriff's office.

Organizations decided to call for the program to be terminated after the Obama administration last month announced plans to revamp it, said Marielena Hincapie, executive director of the National Immigration Law Center.

"Our assessment is these changes are really cosmetic changes and are not going to achieve

the type of structural changes that are needed," Hincapie said. "Given the violations that have been documented and the potential for increased racial profiling and increased violation, at this point, the best thing is to stop administering this program."

Signatories to the letter include the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Anti-Defamation League and others.

Matt Chandler, a spokesman for the Department of Homeland Security, said the agency takes the concerns raised by the signatories very seriously but believes the administration's revamp will strengthen federal government oversight of the program.

Last month, the government said changes to the program included requiring local agencies to resolve criminal charges that led to the arrest of immigrants and establishing a complaint process.

Chandler said 66 local law enforcement agencies currently have 287(g) programs and 13 more have been approved to start them. ■

Gov't tightens oversight of laptop border searches

WASHINGTON—The Obama administration on Thursday put new restrictions on searches of laptops at US borders to address concerns that federal agents have been rummaging through travelers' personal information.

The long-criticized practice of searching travelers' electronic devices will continue, but a supervisor now would need to approve holding a device for more than five days. Any copies of information taken from travelers' machines would be destroyed within days if there were no legal reason to hold the information.

Given all the personal details that people store on digital devices, border searches of laptops and other gadgets can give law enforcement officials far more revealing pictures of travelers than suitcase inspections might yield. That has set off alarms among civil liberties groups and travelers' advocates who say the government has crossed a line by examining electronic contact lists and confidential e-mail messages, trade secrets and proprietary business files, financial and medical records and other deeply private information.

In some cases, travelers suspected that border agents were copying their files after taking their laptops and cell phones away for time periods ranging from a few minutes to a few weeks or longer.

Last July, amid mounting outside pressure, the Homeland Security Department issued a formal policy stating that federal agents can search documents and electronic devices at the border without a

warrant or even suspicion. The procedures also allowed border agents to retain documents and devices for "a reasonable period of time" to perform a thorough search "on-site or at an off-site location."

The new directive, effective immediately, put more restrictions on the searches:

A supervisor must be present during these searches.

As before, Customs and Border Protection officials can keep the electronic device or information on it only if they have probable cause to believe it is connected to a crime. But now if there is no legal reason to hold the information, it must be destroyed within seven days.

Officers must consult agency lawyers if they want to view a traveler's sensitive legal material, medical records or a journalist's work-related information.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents cannot keep property for more than 30 days, depending on the circumstances of each case.

Marcia Hofmann, a lawyer with the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a digital civil rights advocacy group, said in an interview the new rules are an improvement. But they don't go far enough, she said.

She said travelers should be told if information is copied from their devices. The new directive states that federal agents must tell travelers if they are looking at their property. But if officials copy the hard drive during this search, the traveler will not know.

"I don't think that's the way

to go," Hofmann said.

Reps. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., and Loretta Sanchez, D-Calif., commended the administration for tightening oversight of these searches.

Opponents of the searches have said they threaten Fourth Amendment safeguards against unreasonable search and seizure and could chill free expression and other activities protected by the First Amendment. What's more, they warn, such searches raise concerns about ethnic and religious profiling since the targets often are Muslims, including US citizens and permanent residents.

The searches, which predate the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, have uncovered everything from martyrdom videos and other violent jihadist materials to child pornography and stolen intellectual property, according to the government.

One successful search the government cites from recent years: In 2006, a man arriving from the Netherlands at the Minneapolis airport had digital pictures of high-level al-Qaida officials, video clips of improvised explosive devices being detonated and of the man reading his will. The man was convicted of visa fraud and removed from the country.

Between Oct. 1, 2008, and Aug. 11 of this year, Customs and Border Protection officers processed more than 221 million travelers at US borders and searched about 1,000 laptops, of which 46 were "in-depth" searches, the Homeland Security Department said. (AP)

Comelec registers 200,000 more...

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"The Comelec's RERB [Resident Election Registration Board] have conducted five hearings already; and contrary to the claims of Migrant, the RERB has acted upon 115,831 applications for OAV registration," said Jimenez.

He noted only 4,302 OAV applications for regis-

tration were disapproved by the poll body.

Many of those applications came from Filipino immigrants who refused or failed to sign an affidavit promising to return to the country, three years after exercising their right to vote in absentia. ■

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New impetus for bill banning ...

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The bill has picked up key support in the Senate, where it was introduced earlier this month by Oregon Democrat Jeff Merkley and Maine Republicans Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe. Even without other GOP senators, Merkley believes it has a good chance of obtaining the 60 votes that likely will be needed to pass the Senate.

The main Senate champion of ENDA in the past had been Sen. Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, who died Tuesday. That role was passed on to Merkley earlier this year.

There is another difference from 2007. Frank now has a policy adviser who is a female-to-male transsexual. Diego Sanchez is the first transgender person hired for a senior congressional staff position on Capitol Hill.

Sanchez has done extensive face-to-face lobbying for ENDA, and Frank says that's enabled some members of Congress to get to know a transsexual for the first time.

"He interacts with a lot of people," Frank said. "Prejudice is literally ignorance."

Frank says he now doubts votes will be cast against ENDA solely because it extends to transgender people.

Sanchez is a longtime activist who worked for the AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts and was a delegate to the Democratic National Convention last year before joining Frank's staff. Back in 2007, he was among a minority of transgender activists who accepted Frank's tactical decision to drop gender identity from that version of ENDA.

"He's called on the entire community since then to lobby, work—and the community has said, 'OK, we've got one game plan, and it's Barney,'" Sanchez said. "There's broader support this time."

Opponents of ENDA—led by several national conservative groups—concede that the bill has enough support to clear the House, and expect a closely fought battle in the Senate.

Ashley Horne, federal issues analyst for Focus on the Family, promised that her conservative Christian ministry would encourage tough opposition.

"It's definitely a bill we will put a lot of resources toward fighting," she said. "Our primary concern is the chipping away of religious liberties."

Twenty-one states already have laws prohibiting workplace discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, and 12 extend those laws to gender identity—California, Colorado, Iowa, Illinois, Maine, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont and Washington. Several other states protect public employees who are gay or transgender.

The experience of these states shows that pas-

sage a federal law is unlikely to unleash a flood of litigation and conflict, Frank and Merkley say.

Minnesota, for example, has had a non-discrimination law covering transgender people since 1993 that rarely triggers controversies. Oregon passed a comparable bill in 2007.

"There were concerns there'd be a huge number of lawsuits—it simply didn't materialize," Merkley said.

However, attorney Jim Campbell of the Alliance Defense Fund, a Christian legal group, said ENDA would impose its provisions on more conservative states with more business owners who have religious objections to hiring gays and transsexuals.

Campbell also worries that ENDA will serve gay-rights activists' long-term strategic interests.

"One of the really big problems with enacting ENDA is in the future litigation battles dealing with same-sex marriage," Campbell said. "It will provide ammunition for homosexual activists in the future to push their agenda in the court system throughout the country."

Some conservatives say ENDA is unnecessary.

"There is no epidemic of homosexuals being fired; in fact, they are increasingly being courted by major corporations," contends Peter LaBarbera of Americans for Truth About Homosexuality. "It's religiously devout employees ... who face reprisals for opposing homosexuality."

The National Center for Transgender Equality disagrees. It recently released a survey of 6,500 transgender Americans that said 91 percent had faced bias at work.

Among those claiming harassment was Toni Maviki, a former corrections officer in New Hampshire who said she was pummeled by a fellow guard who learned she was transitioning from being a man to being a woman.

"I carried a badge and I protected all you people and there was no law to protect me from harm," Maviki testified earlier this year.

Maviki said she filed complaints that led to further harassment, and finally quit her job. Her testimony failed to sway a state Senate committee, which voted against extending anti-bias provisions to transgender people.

National gay-rights groups will be watching ENDA closely this year.

"We're further than we've ever been, but there is certainly still work to be done," said Joe Solmonese, president of the Human Rights Campaign. "It is frustrating sometimes, having to explain to the community that there are so many procedural hurdles in our way." ■