

# 30-Year-High SAT Math Scores Linked to Rigorous Coursetaking

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The average SAT mathematics score this year hit the highest mark in 30 years, College Board officials said here last week, pointing to the increasing number of students taking higher-level courses as a significant reason for the improvement.

Math scores increased 3 points, to 515, while verbal scores remained at 505 for the fifth consecutive year. The maximum score on each of those sections of the test is 800.

A record-high number of high school students took the SAT and the ACT, the two major college-entrance exams, this year, according to recently released national data. In addition, more students than ever are taking such rigorous courses as calculus and physics, testing officials said.

The ACT and SAT help college officials with admissions, placement, and scholarship decisions.

The SAT tests students' math and verbal reasoning and is administered by the New York City-based College Board on a scale of 400 to 1600 for the combined sections.

Given by the Iowa City-based ACT Inc., the ACT measures math, verbal, and science reasoning on a 36-point scale.

Students who had taken precalculus, calculus, or physics scored 33 to 96 points above the average combined SAT score.

The proportion of SAT-takers enrolled in higher-level classes increased in the class of 2000; 24 percent had taken calculus and 49 percent physics, compared with 19 percent and 44 percent, respectively, in 1990.

In addition, 88 percent of SAT-takers this year reported having taken at least three years of science, also a record high for those taking the test.

The stagnation in verbal scores, test officials note, comes at a time when more SAT-takers speak English as a second language.

More than a third of this year's SAT-takers were the first in their families to attempt to attend college. More than half those tested were women, and 34 percent were non-Hispanic minorities.

## Achievement Gap Remains

Despite the increase in rigorous coursetaking, the gap between the scores of whites and minority students on the SAT remained. White students earned average combined scores of 1158, compared with 860 for African-American and 928 for Hispanic students.

Gaston Caperton, the president of the College Board, said at the news conference last week that the differences in scores between racial or ethnic groups might re-

flect disparities in the quality of schools. Minority students are more likely to attend poorer schools with weaker teachers and less access to high-level classes such as Advanced Placement courses, he noted.

"It has nothing to do with potential," Mr. Caperton said. He highlighted the College Board's effort to bring AP classes to all high schools as a way to reduce the gap.

Since 1990, the gap between the scores of white and black students has increased slightly on both portions of the test. Asian-American students, meanwhile, recorded the highest average in math this year, with a score of 565. White students' average verbal score of 528 was the highest of any race.

While men still have a higher combined average score than women—1040 for men, compared with 1002 for women—the gender gap is closing in both math and verbal scores, officials said. Since 1990, women's verbal scores on the SAT have increased by 8 points, compared with a 2-point gain for men. Since the 1980s, the gap in math scores has narrowed by 5 points.

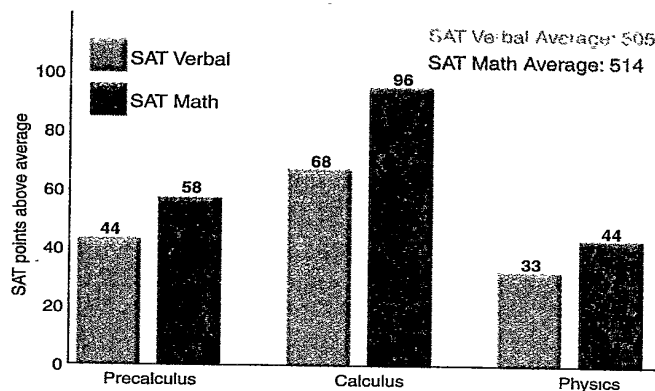
Robert Schaeffer, the public education director of FairTest, a watchdog group based in Cambridge, Mass., that is a longtime critic of the SAT, said in a statement that the SAT scores offered little information about the country's real educational problems and revealed more about the exam's flaws.

Women earn higher grades in college than men, Mr. Schaeffer pointed out, although men outperform women on the test, which is designed to predict college success.

"On the rival college-admissions test, the ACT, male and female scores are essentially the same—just as they are on the National Assessment of

## SAT Scores and High School Courses

Students who took higher-level mathematics and science classes scored above the national average on both the verbal and math portions of the college-entrance examination.



SOURCE: The College Board

Educational Progress," Mr. Schaeffer said. "The SAT gender gap says more about the test's biases than educational attainment."

The College Board says that, to ensure fairness, the test goes through a series of evaluations before it is administered.

"It is absolutely the most highly researched test in the world," said Gretchen Rigol, the board's vice president of higher education services.

## Steady at ACT

For the fourth consecutive year, average ACT scores, which measure students' ability in English, math, reading, and science reasoning, remained steady at 21.

"From the 1960s through the 1980s, the national average score fluctuated constantly," Richard L. Ferguson, the president of ACT Inc., said in a statement. "Decreases outnumbered increases, and increases were seldom consecutive. Today, the situation is the reverse. We haven't seen a decline in the national average since 1989."

For the ACT, the proportion of high school students who reported having taken a core curriculum of at least four years of English and three years each of math, social sciences, and natural sciences, increased to 63 percent, from just 48 percent in 1990.

While high school students were taking a more demanding courseload, the ACT results also showed that 47 percent of those who hoped to enroll at a selective college had an ACT score at or below the national average.

The proportion of ACT-takers who reported themselves as being home schooled, while still small, increased by 41 percent since last year.

Those students scored slightly higher than the national average.