

# PSAT To Add Writing Test To Settle Bias Case

## Testing

By Millicent Lawton

The co-sponsor and the administrator of the Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test have agreed to revise the exam as part of a settlement of a federal gender-bias complaint. The decision could have broader implications for the way that college-bound girls' achievement and ability are judged.

The U.S. Department of Education announced the three-way settlement last week among its office for civil rights; the New York City-based College Board, which co-sponsors the test; and the Educational Testing Service of Princeton, N.J., which developed the PSAT and administers and scores it.

The College Board and the testing service have denied the allegations that the test, which is used in awarding National Merit Scholarships, is biased against girls. The civil rights office did not come to a conclusion about wrongdoing.

But the settlement raises questions about its possible impact on the SAT itself, the college-entrance exam that nearly 1.8 million students take annually. And some educators also wonder if revising the PSAT gives girls an unnecessary helping hand.

The PSAT is supposed to predict performance on the SAT. "The upshot of this settlement is that if the PSAT needs an overhaul in order to eliminate gender bias, I think it's very hard not to draw the conclusion that something has to happen with the SAT as well," said Pamela Zappardino, the executive director of the National Center for Fair & Open Testing, or FairTest, a Cambridge, Mass.-based watchdog group that focuses on standardized testing. The American Civil Liberties Union filed the civil rights complaint on FairTest's behalf.

The primary revision to the PSAT will be the inclusion of a multiple-choice test of writing skills.

Education Department and College Board officials said girls tend to score well on writing-skills tests, and it is hoped—though not certain—that girls' scores will improve enough on the revised PSAT to close the gap between their overall performance on the test and that of boys.

Donald M. Stewart, the president of the College Board, said he hoped the change to the PSAT was laying the groundwork for a similar, long-planned addition of a writing-skills exam to the SAT.

### Millions at Stake

The settlement attempts to resolve the complaint filed with the OCR in 1994. The test is used each year to award college-bound high schoolers with about 7,000 National Merit Scholarships worth a total of \$27 million.

FairTest alleged that the College Board and the ETS violated Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. The law prohibits sex discrimination in education programs that receive federal funding. The other co-sponsor of the exam, the National Merit

Scholarship Corp. in Evanston, Ill., receives no federal funds and is not subject to Title IX.

The complaint asserted that relying solely on PSAT scores to winnow the pool of scholarship candidates denies girls an equal opportunity to receive the college aid. Girls' scores lag behind those of boys on both the verbal and math sections of the PSAT, as they do on the SAT.

Girls, however, receive better

## College Board and ETS deny allegations of gender discrimination.

grades than their male peers in high school and college, said Norma V. Cantu, the assistant secretary for civil rights at the Education Department. The disproportionate award of National Merit Scholarships to boys, she said, "doesn't reflect the better academic performance of women."

At the time of the complaint, boys made up about 45 percent of those who took the PSAT, yet they represented 60 percent of the National Merit semifinalists and finalists, according to the complaint.

The National Merit Scholarship Corp. does not release gender-related information and did not supply FairTest with its data, said Elaine Detweiler, a spokeswoman for the nonprofit, privately funded corporation. But she did not dispute FairTest's 1994 estimate.

She said the gap between the percentage of male and female semifinalists has been narrowing for a decade, but there has not been a dramatic change since 1994. Currently, she said, "some-what more than half" of the semifinalists and finalists are male.

Last year, 44 percent of the 11th graders who took the PSAT were males, said the College Board.

Nearly 1.2 million high school juniors take the test each year and are eligible to compete for the highly regarded merit scholarships. About 15,000 qualify, based on their PSAT scores, to be semifinalists. Of those, 14,000 make it to the group of finalists. Finalists and scholarship winners are selected based on grades, rank in class, an essay, and other criteria.

### A Rigged Test?

As part of the agreement, the College Board must offer the revised PSAT in October 1997 and include on it a multiple-choice test of written English, Ms. Cantu said.

Also, beginning immediately, the College Board and the ETS agreed to conduct research on

how to add high school grades as a criterion for the first round of qualification for the National Merit competition.

Ms. Zappardino said she considered the agreement a victory. "By agreeing to this settlement, there is an effective acknowledgment there is gender bias and inaccuracy in the PSAT," she said.

But Mr. Stewart said the settlement merely speeded up the College Board's earlier decision to add a writing-skills feature by 1999.

Ms. Detweiler contended that the writing-skills section was added because "it's an educationally sound thing to do."

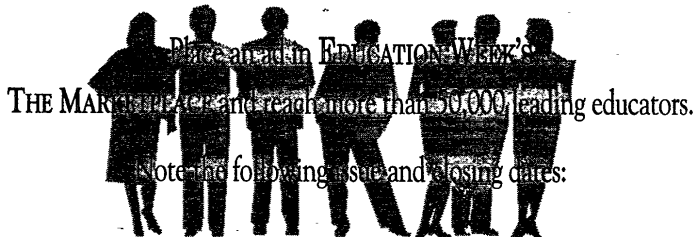
Deborah Brake, a senior counsel at the National Women's Law Center in Washington, said the PSAT is an imprecise measure of the ability and achievement of young women. Because it "overpredicts" the success of boys and "underpredicts" that of girls, she said, "what we have right now is a test that is very clearly rigged in favor of boys."

But Diane S. Ravitch, a senior research scholar at New York University and a former assistant U.S. education secretary, blamed the parties to the agreement for caving in to what she termed "political manipulation."

"What gave the SAT and PSAT value was the sense that they're objective," Ms. Ravitch said. Now the College Board is saying "it's objective, but we can rig the results to try to pacify our critics."

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For the first time, veteran test publisher CTB/McGraw-Hill is offering states and school districts reports of test results that show where students stack up against five performance levels.

The option is one feature of the new assessment series that the Monterey, Calif.-based CTB unveiled with fanfare last week at a briefing in Washington and events for educators at 12 sites nationwide.

Called TerraNova, the series incorporates a new version of the popular multiple-choice Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills as well as other test-format options, such as open-response and performance exams that ask students to come up with their own answers. The series' design allows states and districts to pick and choose among the formats or have a test custom-designed.

The series includes new versions of both the CTBS Survey and the broader CTBS Battery as well as a format called Multiple Assessments, which offers both multiple-choice and constructed-response components. The publisher also will continue to offer its older products.

TerraNova, for grades 1-12, cost \$20 million to develop, but the investment apparently has already started to pay off. CTB reports five states—Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, Nevada, and Wisconsin—and more than 100 districts, including San Diego, have adopted some parts of the series for use as early as this fall.

A feature of the series that CTB officials say makes it unique among its chief competitors is the way in which test items are presented to students. The tests resemble classroom instructional materials, such as workbooks. Sample pages provided by CTB are colorful, attractively designed, and carry photographs or other illustrations.

The five performance levels set by CTB—which appear on a test report at the discretion of the state or district—begin with three initial levels representing partial proficiency. They proceed to levels four and five, which designate "proficient" and "advanced" knowledge.

The performance levels are comparable to the basic, proficient, and advanced levels used for the U.S. Department of Education's National Assessment of Educational Progress but were developed differently, said Melvin W. Webb II, the product manager for scoring and reports at CTB.

Unlike with the grade-specific NAEP, TerraNova's performance levels span developmental groups. For example, one set applies to grades 3, 4, and 5. The expectation, Mr. Webb said, is that younger students will reach the lower levels of mastery, but that 5th graders should perform at the proficient level.

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