



Hartford Courant.

Revamped, More Challenging SAT Arrives Next Month

By Kathleen Megan, Feb. 14, 2016

Connecticut's 11th-graders will take a revised version of the SAT next month that will also for the first time serve as the state's assessment of student progress.

Notably, the new test eliminates any penalty for wrong answers leaving students free to guess and no longer requires students to know obscure, esoteric vocabulary words. Also gone are the puzzle-like trick questions that the test has been known for. The essay portion is now optional.

For educators and state officials who decided to replace the controversial Smarter Balanced Assessment test with the SAT for high school juniors, the key change in the new test is its alignment with the Common Core-based academic standards adopted by Connecticut and many states.

The new test, with combined scores based on a 400-to-1600 scale, will require more reading and students will need more advanced math skills.

To Paul Vicinus, West Hartford's director of secondary education, the difference between the old SAT and this one is that the old test focused on aptitude, while the new one looks at achievement and understanding of what's learned in the classroom.

"The SAT has adapted to us as a state, as an institution," Vicinus said. "Therefore we are finding that they will be a more useful tool for us."

Jeremiah Quinlan, Yale dean of undergraduate admissions, said that over the past several years, many of his colleagues in college admissions had been expressing the opinion that the SAT needed to be "more open and transparent" and more closely correlated with the work students do in the classroom.

"Will this SAT be able to do that? Details are still forthcoming and it will take time to know whether this bold effort can succeed," Quinlan said.

But he added: "Getting ready for college should never be about tricks or last-minute cramming. I believe that the redesigned SAT is on the right path in its transparency and openness, and that it sends the clear signal that if you work hard and achieve, we in higher education will work to open doors for you."

Jeffrey Villar, the former superintendent of Windsor and now executive director of the Connecticut Council for Education Reform, said he is concerned about the equity of using the SAT as a state test when wealthier families can pay for prep programs that poorer families can't afford.

The state has countered that the SAT has an arrangement with a free online tutoring service, Khan Academy, which ensures that every student, regardless of income, can get help on the SAT and work to improve scores. Villar, however, says computerized instruction may be helpful but is not as effective as interacting with a teacher in person.

What's On The Test

College Board Vice President Stacy Caldwell said the new test reflects the latest research on the skills needed for a successful first year in college.

In the critical reading and language sections of the test, rare vocabulary words such as "prevaricate" and "sagacious" have disappeared and been replaced with words that come up frequently in everyday academic work, such as "synthesis" and "empirical."

"It's a focus on academic vocabulary that students will use again and use in context," said Caldwell.

In addition, in the past, reading selections might have varied from one SAT test to the next, but in the new test, students will always see at least one science passage, one literature passage, and one authentic historical text.

As they were on the old test, students will be asked to answer questions based on the text, but what's new is that they will also have to identify the evidence they used to support their answer.

The math section has been designed to closely align with what students are learning in the classroom and will use in college, Caldwell said, including problem-solving and data analysis, linear equations, and an advanced math section that includes systems of equations and quadratic equations.

"One of the things we've tried to eliminate is some of that trickiness" found on the old test, Caldwell said, "questions that maybe frankly really weren't the sort of math that students would see in high school or college."

A calculator is allowed on some parts of the test and not on others, so some educators are encouraging students to brush up on paper and pencil calculations.

The essay was made optional because so many colleges don't require it, Caldwell said, and is also substantially different. It used to be that students got a quote or a piece of wisdom to reflect on personally such as, "What is more important, imagination or knowledge?" Now, they will be given a reading selection and asked to analyze how the author uses evidence, reasoning, stylistic and persuasive elements.

Is The Test Harder?

Caldwell says the new test is different, but isn't harder than the old test and she expects to see a similar distribution of scores.

Others, such as Michael Boothroyd, executive director of the pre-college program at Kaplan Test Prep, said the exam is "much more rigorous," including more advanced math.

It's "a very different feeling when you sit down to take this test," Boothroyd said, than SATs of the past. "The sections are much longer. You have to concentrate for longer periods of time. You have to

get the first question right to get the second part of the question right. I think it's going to be a very demanding test for students."

"There's a lot more reading in the math and a lot more math in the reading," he added. .

Previously, Boothroyd said, a math question might be difficult because its phrasing made it hard to discern what was being asked. Now, he said, the questions are more straightforward, but the math itself is harder.

Caldwell said that much of the test content would have been covered in Algebra I, but some topics might be part of geometry or Algebra II. She said the topics covered in classrooms can vary "reasonably dramatically," depending on the district.

Daryl Capuano, chief executive officer of The Learning Consultants, a Madison-based firm that offers SAT prep classes and college consulting, said he sees the new test as more rigorous, but "not dramatically so."

Capuano said some of the math is more difficult and the reading sections are longer, requiring a longer attention span. The new analytical essay is also more rigorous, he added, and a far better challenge than the old essay.

But if the test is harder, Capuano said, students needn't worry about their scores because the test is graded on a curve. He said he expects students to earn scores that are about what they would have gotten on the old SAT.

Capuano said that because students – and parents – are nervous about the new SAT he is seeing a greater interest in the ACT than in the past -- the other major college-entry exam that is more popular in out west.

As a result, Capuano has combined his seminars on the SAT and the ACT into one, so students can prepare for both tests at once.

Janet Rosier, a Westport-based college consultant, said she has advised her students to take the ACT this spring as a hedge against the possibility that the new SAT may have glitches. She also notes the long wait students will have to get their scores on the March test. Normally, it takes less than a month to get the scores, but on the March test, because it is new, the College Board says scores won't be ready until May.

In fact, for her clients who don't live in Connecticut where all students must take the SAT in March, she is advising that they take the ACT and then wait on taking the SAT until June or next fall when the performance of the new test is more certain

"There are too many variables now with the SAT," said Rosier. "The ACT is the safer bet."

Students interviewed about the new SAT were pleased that Connecticut is offering it instead of Smarter Balanced and not overly-concerned about the new format.

Nicole Luongo, a junior at Daniel Hand High School, said she's glad the new SAT has gotten rid of unusual obscure words. "I feel like I would have spent so much time memorizing vocab words that might not even be on it!"

It did make her nervous, she said, to hear that the math on the test may be more demanding than in the past, but she's hoping that the prevalence of word problems could prove an advantage for a strong reader like her. She's definitely planning to re-take the SAT because she wants to include the essay – not part of the state's March freebie. It's required by some of the schools she'll apply to. "I want to demonstrate my writing skills," she said.

Copyright © 2016, [Hartford Courant](#)