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Suddenly, 1600 on SAT exam isn't so good

Wednesday, April 13, 2005

By Eleanor Chute, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Try this new math problem: If 1600 was the top score on the old SAT college entrance exam and 2400 is the top score on the new one, what does 1990 mean?

"I don't really know how good that is," said Quaker Valley High School junior Abby Cartus of Edgeworth, who earned a 1990 on the first administration of the new test. "I guess I did well."

A lot of students are guessing as they look at their scores from the new SAT, given for the first time last month.

Scores were available online Monday for nearly all of the students who took the test. The others are expected to be available next week.

About 300,000 students nationwide took the test, which for the first time had three sections -- math, critical reading and writing -- each worth 800 points. The old exam had two parts, math and verbal, also worth 800 points each.

Averages and percentiles won't be released until there is a year's worth of data, so the first figures to use for comparison won't be available until August 2006. That's when the College Board, which gives the test, reports on the Class of 2006.

Of course, the 107 students -- including two in Pennsylvania -- who earned the top score of 2400 can safely assume they did very well.

If other students want some idea of how they did, Caren Scorpanos, spokeswoman for the College Board, recommended looking at each section separately.

Scores on the math section are designed to be similar to those on the old math test. That means a 600 on the new section and a 600 on the old section represent the same level.

The scores for critical reading, which does not include the analogies of the old test, are set to be similar to those on the old verbal test.

The wild card is the writing test. Because the College Board's old writing test was taken by a limited number of students, there is no good

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Some colleges have indicated that, at least initially, they won't give much weight to the writing score.

North Hills High School guidance counselor Gina Farrell said students "don't know how the writing is going to be interpreted by schools they're applying to."

She is encouraging parents and students to contact the schools they're considering to find out the requirements.

The writing test has attracted the most attention because it features a 25-minute essay, which is rated by at least two trained scorers.

Working with Pearson Educational Measurement in Iowa City, about 2,400 scorers nationwide, who were trained online, scored 300,000 essays in 10 days. All were current or former teachers who had taught courses with a substantial amount of writing, and most have advanced degrees.

The scorers set their own schedules and pace, but typically spent three to four minutes on an essay. Each essay was scored by at least two people. A third was called if the two scores differed significantly.

Carol McGrane, an English coordinator and teacher in the Wilkes-Barre School District in Luzerne County, scored about 800 essays on her home computer and saw essays that rated from 0 to 6, the top score.

She didn't see any poetry, but she did see both traditional and creative essays, some giving multiple examples from literature.

"These essays kind of confirmed these kids are reading. They're not just playing with their Game Boys or PlayStations," she said.

Some of the lower-scoring papers were just a half-page long, when two pages were provided.

"That's just not enough content for you to be able to judge it," she said, guessing the students spent too much of their time thinking about it instead of just writing.

Overall, she said, "I was very surprised they did as well as they did. I saw some solid writers."

Colleges will be able to access applicants' essays online, and McGrane said some colleges will see "excellent sample writing."

(Education writer Eleanor Chute can be reached at echute@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1955.)

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