

High school students face new SATs

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High school juniors can add a new cause of stress to a list that includes college visits and Advanced Placement courses — the new SAT I exam, to be administered in March, complete with a written essay and more difficult math problems.

"It's scary," said Lynn Gostomski, whose son, Matt, is entering his junior year at Westhill High School in Stamford. "It's unfortunate that this is happening to my son's group — they have to be the ones that are starting the whole process."

The SAT I will have three sections, each worth 800 points, bringing the maximum possible score to 2,400 from 1,600. The College Board, which runs the SAT and other testing programs, eliminated analogies from the verbal section and increased the number of reading comprehension questions.

The board also created a new verbal section of grammar questions and a 25-minute essay. Students will write responses to generic prompts such as, "Do you think failure can help make you a success?"

The new verbal section mirrors the SAT-II Writing test, and the revamped math section will be similar to the SAT-II Math-IC test, which includes advanced algebra problems.

The test will take three hours and 45 minutes, a 45-minute increase. The cost will increase from \$26 to \$36 or \$38.

"It's a huge change," said Bud Pollak, an SAT tutor with clients in Fairfield County. "A kid who has problems with reading comprehension and reading speed won't be able to compensate for that by memorizing 200 vocabulary words. But a . . . good reader should do a lot better on this version."

The tutoring service he runs with math coach Lynn Carnegie has seen a slight increase in business since the College Board announced the new test, Pollak said. Kaplan Educational Services, a leading test preparation company, has reported a 78 percent increase over last year for its practice test sessions and spring workshops.

"Parents are anxious," he said. "They want to know if we will be ready." Pollak and other tutors said the changes will make it easier to prepare students for the verbal section.

"Now I can teach students grammar rules and they will get those questions right every time," Pollak said. "Before, we were dependent on how good the student's vocabulary was."

Eric Arzubi, director of Raging Knowledge, a test-preparation service based in Westport, agreed. The new SAT-I will focus more on useful writing skills and less on rote memorization, Arzubi said.

The old version was biased in favor of students with high IQs, because so many of the questions involved word games and math riddles, he said.

"The old test was a glorified IQ test," Arzubi said. "Assessing kids based just on IQ is not fair. Now the SAT will be a great way to see how well a kid can write."

Kristin Carnahan, a spokeswoman for the College Board, said the new test will better reflect the skills students learn in the classroom.

"Before, if you saw a kid studying analogies, you could be pretty sure he was preparing for the SAT," Carnahan said.

Arzubi and Pollak said parents seem most worried about the essay.

"When kids fill out college applications, they have months to write the essays," parent Lynn Gostomski said. "Now all of a sudden, they will have several people reading an essay they have to write very quickly."

Matt Gostomski seemed less worried than his mother.

"I'd rather have (the essay) than the stuff it replaced," he said. "I really didn't like the analogies. The vocab you needed for that section was crazy."

Arzubi is preparing students for the essay by giving them sample writing prompts and having them practice creating an outline in five minutes. Pollak said he advises against using an outline during the test because of the time limit, but he said it's good for practice because it make students organize their ideas.

Carnegie said she is having a harder time preparing for the new math section, mostly because the College Board has not released sample tests.

The College Board will post a full-length practice test on its Web site this month, Carnahan said. In October, the board plans to release its first major study guide, with eight sample tests.

Test preparation services such as Kaplan and the Princeton Review are offering six-week courses for about \$1,000. The high cost of such courses and the increase in the cost of the SAT-I has raised questions about whether the new test will widen the gaps between the scores of white and minority students, and poor and wealthy students.

The changes might not amount to much because most students already were taking the Math and Writing SAT-II tests that provided the basis for the new SAT-I, Pollak said.

"As a tutor, I'm happy because it's a more teachable test, but I don't really understand what difference it makes," he said.