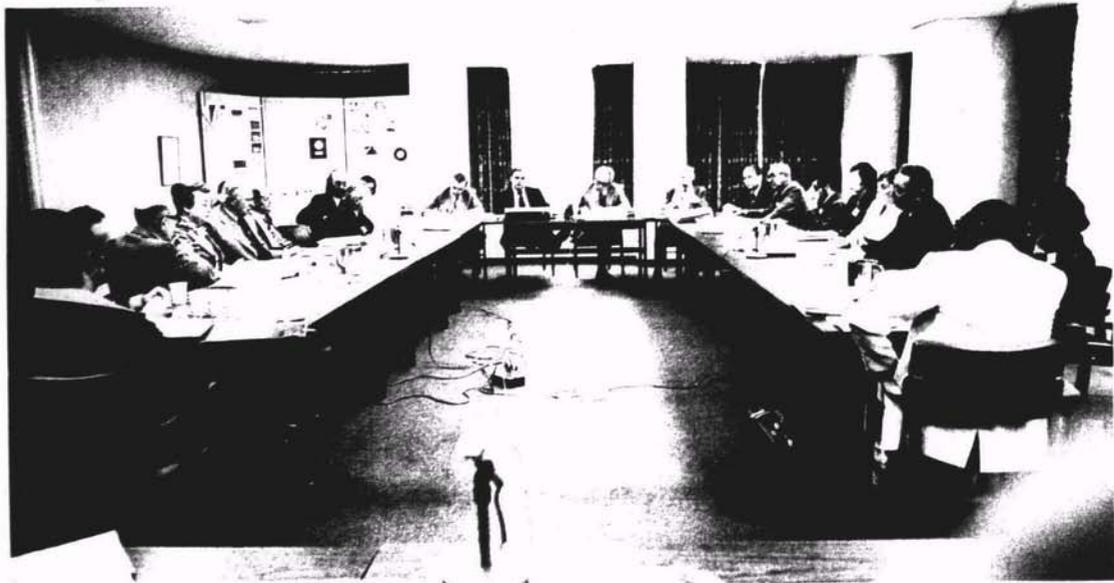


David G. Savage

The Long Decline in SAT Scores



Members of the Advisory Panel on the SAT Score Decline at one of the four plenary sessions held by the full panel. Photo: The College Board.

A practicing journalist details the points made by the blue ribbon panel that studied the effects of the long decline in college board scores. He also examines the causes and even the tests themselves in attempting to explain the "why."

The long decline in college board scores has been to education what the "Pennsylvania Legionnaire's disease" was to medicine—a mystery that prompts endless public speculation and no final answer. Two years ago, the College Board commissioned a distinguished 21-member panel chaired by former Labor Secretary Willard Wirtz to answer one question—why?

Their report released in August does, on balance, a good job. The panel could be faulted for using admittedly "circumstantial evidence"

to validate a whole host of possible causes. Seemingly, fluoridated water and the tests themselves were the only possibilities eliminated. But considering the complexity of the problem, the report puts forth some plausible, even convincing explanations. And while news reports headlined the comments about television, the "trauma" of Vietnam, and changes in the American family, the panel actually leaned heaviest on two school-related factors—changes in the student population and changes in the curriculum. Now that public speculation has quieted down, educators should give some hard thought to the issues raised by the report.

Two Phases Noted in Decline

The 14-year decline came in two distinct phases, the panel said. Prior to 1970, the falling "average" score is largely attributable to more poor and

average students taking the test. And not necessarily blacks or women, as suggested by some reports. In 1952, about one-fourth of an average high school class went on to college. By 1970, almost half went. During the decade of the 1960s alone, the number of students taking the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) tripled. So it should hardly be a surprise that the "average" of all scores should decline; it would have been an amazing accomplishment if it were otherwise. As the panel notes, the real question is "whether a 75 percent cross section of all young people can ever be brought up to the eleventh or twelfth grade academic level previously achieved by the top 30 percent of them. Part of democracy's sustaining notion is that they can be."

But since 1970, a steeper and more "pervasive" drop has occurred, and this can't be explained away by other students taking the test. The test taking population stabilized, but fewer scored over 600, and even valedictorians' scores declined at the same rate.

Fewer Basic Courses Required

Searching for an answer for this decline, the panel immediately hits on a vital point. The evidence suggests that "fewer basic courses are now being required of all students in high school, with many more electives being introduced into the curriculum," the report says. "This is particularly true in English and the verbal skills areas" where the declines have been larger. The data, while not overwhelming, indicate there is a trend. Harnischfeger and Wiley of the University of Chicago, using HEW data, found an 11 percent drop in English enrollments nationwide from 1971 to 1973 and a 50 percent drop in advanced English enrollments. The



Massachusetts Department of Education found a proliferation of electives; the two most common ones were science fiction and radio/television/film. Similarly, California reported a 19 percent drop in English course enrollments between 1972 and 1975, a 77 percent drop in English composition enrollments, and a 100 percent increase in literature electives like children's theater, mystery and detective stories, and executive English.

The panel warns against "an oversimplistic interpretation" of these findings. The electives may be taken more by students who don't go on to college. But here's how the report sums up: "Our firmest conclusion is that the critical factors in the relationship between curricular change and the SAT scores are (a) that less thoughtful and critical reading is now being demanded and done, and (b) that careful writing has

Williard Wirtz, chairman of the Advisory Panel on the SAT Score Decline, making a point at one of the panel's meetings. Photo: The College Board.

apparently gone out of style." (The report confirms the second point by clogging some of its key sentences with mushy, unnecessary verbiage.)

The public and a lot of politicians have gotten the gist of this message. It is that the schools have deserted the basics in favor of innovations, electives, entertainment, or whatever. The result has been "minimal competency" laws in at least half the states. But the unanswered question is, why didn't educators perceive a problem and try to remedy it sooner? Did educators allow the emphasis on reading and writing to slip away in the past decade? Or is the Wirtz panel wrong?

A Lowering of Standards

Beyond the apparent curricular

Harold Howe II, Vice-Chairman of the Advisory Panel and Vice-President, Education and Research, The Ford Foundation, New York, at one of the four plenary sessions in New York. Photo: The College Board.



changes, the panel sees "a general lowering of educational standards." For example, absenteeism "formerly considered intolerable is now condoned," grade inflation has sapped the meaning of an "A" or "B," promotion from grade to grade has "become almost automatic," homework has "apparently been cut in half," and open admission colleges are available "even if entering students don't know how to read or write." The report contains some evidence to back up each of these charges. For example, most high school textbooks have been lowered from an eleventh or twelfth grade reading level to a ninth grade level, as gauged by several standard measures of reading difficulty. But the report is quick to note that in each case, "the schools are both a contributing cause and a victim of this phenomenon." High schools are trying to educate a generation of young people that includes many who in previous generations would have already dropped out. The panel's verdict: "Our best judgment is that their (educators) responsibility centers in having made more concessions because of changing circumstances and demands—by tolerating excessive absenteeism, by themselves credentialing incompetence, by adopting less-demanding textbooks, and by condoning little reading and less writing—than has been good for anybody involved."

Then there is the whole question of the "broader learning context." While there "is virtually no statistical evidence of any causal connection between societal developments and SAT scores," the panel strongly suspects a link. For instance, compared to 20 years ago, there are now more divorced or single parent families, more working mothers, and so on. In 1960, 89 percent of all children under 18 lived with two parents. Today it is

down to 80 percent, and the number of children living with less than two parents increases by 300,000 per year.

What would such a report be without a discussion of television? The evidence here has been cited ad nauseum. "By age 16 most children have spent 10,000 to 15,000 hours watching television, more time than they have spent in school." Of course, the panel has no idea what the effect of this has been. The high point of its discussion is a 1938 quote from E. B. White suggesting that TV will be "the test of modern world." But if so, the report says, "the scores have been declining on that test, too."

Finally, the question of a "decade of distraction." Did a "national disillusionment" sap the motivation and interest of young people? While suspecting it did, the panel concludes, "There is simply no way of knowing how much the trauma, between 1967 and 1975, of a divisive war, political assassinations, burning cities, and the corruption of national leadership affected the motivations of young people."

What About the Tests Themselves?

One other point troubles many. That concerns the tests themselves. While acknowledging that the panel was funded by the College Board and the Educational Testing Service, Wirtz told reporters the group operated with "complete independence." Outside researchers were brought in to examine the SATs, he said.

Is the SAT now somehow more difficult, thus explaining the drop? No, the panel said. "After checking the technical and psychometric aspects of the SAT thoroughly, we find consistent confirmation that the score decline has not resulted from changes in the testing instrument," the report said.

But there is a tougher question for which the panel has no answer. Is the test still "relevant" to what's going on in schools and society? Possibly, "in the 36 years since the present SAT standard was established, the society has set new and different learning goals, colleges or schools have adopted new priorities in education, different learning and communication processes have come



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into use, and that part of the reason for the decline is that the test does not reflect these changes."

By one important but narrow measure, the test is as "valid" as ever. That is, predicting college performance. And that is the SAT's prime purpose. So while society and learning styles may have changed, colleges still tend to reward students with the same skills as before. In the same way, "cultural bias in the SATs is a myth," said Ford Foundation Vice-president Harold Howe, a panel member, because the test is equally good at predicting the college performance of whites and minorities. But is the SAT valid as a barometer of the nation's education system or as a comparative measure of the general intelligence of competing generations of students? On that question, the panel could only call for more research.

Copies of the report—"On Further Examination"—may be obtained at \$4 per copy from College Board Publications, P.O. Box 2815, Princeton, New Jersey 08540. *[Signature]*

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