



180
Beyond the silver lining: Texas SAT scores

Serious questions lost in feel-good analysis

The 2004 SAT scores are out and, according to Texas, major newspapers and the Texas Education Agency, the news is generally good. A closer look at the details, though, raises serious questions about the performance of Texas, most able students and the honesty of reports on public education.

As reported, the good news is SAT scores are up for Hispanic and African-American students while the achievement gap between student groups narrowed. A larger number of students took the test (2.5 percent increase) while scores held steady from previous years.

The bad news, generally obscured or ignored, is that scores for whites, Asians and other racial groups fell. The achievement gap was largely narrowed by bringing top scores down. Texas, average scores actually fell one point, continuing the downward creep of student performance that began in 1996. Down four points, from 996 to 992, Texas, average combined math and verbal score lies far below the national average of 1026.

The achievement gap between Texas students and their peers throughout the nation continues to grow. If students were ranked according to their peers in other states, a comparison discouraged by the SAT's governing College Board, Texas would rank among the lowest 10 states in the nation.

The percentage of students taking the test in Texas continues to diminish as a proportion of total student population. Only 52 percent of Texas students took the SAT in 2004, a number that is above the national average of 48 percent, but below 20 other states, plus the District of Columbia.

The percentage of public school students taking either the SAT or ACT in Texas, has been inching downward since 1993. In 1993, 64.2 percent of public school students took college readiness tests but only 61.9 percent of the class of 2002 was tested, according to the most recent statistics published by the TEA.

These numbers should hoist a red flag for Texans wanting public schools to prepare youth for gainful employment or post-

secondary education, whether vocational training or at a university.

It's time for some tough questions: Why is the outcome of Texas public schools so dismal in comparison to other states? Why is the achievement of our most proficient students declining? Why are fewer students taking college readiness tests?

Some brush these questions aside with reassurances. The TEA proposes achievement will improve as more students take the Recommended High School Program, a curriculum described as college preparatory. More money will improve student outcomes, according to experts testifying for districts now suing taxpayers to increase school funding.

These reassurances are simply wishful thinking and can't be backed up by a single shred of objective, factual evidence. In fact, there's a ton of evidence arguing the contrary. More students are taking the Recommended High School Program today than ever before – 58.2 percent of the class of 2002 took the college preparatory coursework, up from 51.1 percent the previous year – without any demonstrable improvement in college readiness test scores.

There's evidence state standards are too low. A recent evaluation of state curriculum standards published by ACT warns the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills "doesn't necessarily prepare students for the kind of academic work that they will be expected to produce at college."

Scientific research offers no hope that increased funding will result in higher academic achievement. Decades of research, looking at schools in Texas, other states, and internationally, indicates the opposite is more likely. Places with the highest per pupil spending, such as in Kansas City and Washington, D.C., often demonstrate the lowest student achievement.

The U.S., spending more than any other industrialized county participating in the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, ranks at the bottom for most measures of student achievement.

There's plentiful evidence about what can be done to improve student achievement: smarter spending of education dollars, strengthening the state curricula, administration of more rigorous, independent tests, and parental choice.

When Texans look beyond the silver lining of reports about public schools and press for proven solutions, we can create a system of public education that will serve all children.

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*Guest
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From Page:
4
9/7/2004
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From Page:

4

9/7/2004

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