



SAT Scores Hit Rock Bottom

The latest verbal scores for the class of 2011 are the lowest on record. Indeed, the combined reading and math scores have fallen to their lowest level since 1995. No surprise when you consider that No Child Left Behind has just about left every child in the government schools very far behind.

There is actually no better evidence documenting the dumbing-down process than the SAT scores. For example, in 1972, 2,817 students achieved a verbal score of 750 to 800, the highest possible score. In 1987, only 1,363 students achieved that score. In 1994, it was up slightly to 1,438. In other words, over a thousand smarties became dumber.



In 1972, a total of 116,630 students achieved verbal scores between 600 and 800. In 1987, only 88,000 achieved that score.

In 1972, a total of 71,084 scored between 200 and 249 in the verbal test, the lowest possible score. In 1987 the number of students scoring in that lowest category had risen to 123,470. In 1994, that number had increased to 136,841.

And so the smart have been getting dumber, and the dumb have been getting even dumber. It should be noted that the total number of students who took the test in 1972 was 1,022,680; in 1987, it was 1,080,426. In 1994, that number was down to 1,050,386, probably indicating that fewer students felt they could pass the SAT test.

In 1988, the verbal scores of 42 states declined. Only seven states showed improvement. In 1963, the average verbal score was 478. Twenty-five years later, in 1988, it was 428, 50 points lower. And what was the reaction of the Department of Education to this dismal showing? Secretary of Education, William Bennett, expressed sharp disappointment at the test results. "I said in April that the absolute level at which improvements are taking place is unacceptably low. Today it's a bit lower, and still not acceptable."

At the time, I had offered Secretary Bennett my assistance in helping the schools improve literacy with intensive phonics. But he ignored my offer.

In 1991, I wrote: "National Verbal Score Hits New Low, and the Dumbing Down Goes On." I then commented:

We are now eight years into the education reform movement started by the "A Nation at Risk" report in 1983. And what have the educators given us? A new low of 422 in the national SAT verbal score. The previous low of 424 was reached in 1980. Eleven years and billions of dollars later we are lower still. The ability of young Americans to use language — the tool of thought and the primary measure of intelligence — is in serious decline. How much longer can the educators



fool America?

I wrote that 20 years ago, which indicates that the educators have been able to fool Americans much longer than we could have ever imagined. In 1994, the verbal score improved by one point above the bottom.

In 1994, the College Board decided to “recenter” the scoring scale. What had happened since the original 200-800 scale was made in 1941 is that in 1994 the students’ average scores were well below the 500 average of previous generations, which simply reflected the steady dumbing down taking place in American education. In 1994, the verbal “average” was 423, some 77 points below the 500 average, and the math “average” of 479 was 21 points below the 500 average.

Which meant that even the 469 average verbal score made by independent school test takers was well below the 1941 average of 500! And yet those same test takers scored 54 points above the 1994 average of 423. In other words, in 1994 the average student was a lot dumber than the average student of 1941, and the smarter students in 1994 were dumber than the average students of 1941. The College Board explained:

Beginning with the high school class of 1996, the College Board will recenter the scales, based on a more contemporary reference group. This means that the average score will once again be at or about the center of the scale — 500 — for a new reference group from the 1990s....

Setting the average verbal and math scores at 500 means that most students’ scores will be higher. So if a student scored a verbal score of about 430 and a math score of about 470 before recentering, the score would be about 500 for both verbal and math when the test is recentered.

Now you see it, now you don’t. It reminded me of a shell game, using numbers to deceive the public. Everyone’s score will suddenly go up. But the average will still remain an average so that colleges would be able to tell who is or is not above or below average for purposes of acceptance. But what they won’t know is how much dumber these students are from their counterparts in 1941.

Which brings us fast-forward to 2011. According to the College Board, the SAT reading scores for the high school class of 2011 were the lowest on record and combined reading and math scores fell to their lowest point since 1995. And in context of the 800-point text, the three-point decline from last year’s score, which is now 497, is nothing to worry about.

The average verbal score in 2011 was 498. If we wish to see what that score would be in pre-centering terms, we would simply subtract 87 points from 498, which would give us a pre-centered score of 411. In other words, in 1972 the average pre-centered verbal score was 453. Today it is 411, a decline of 42 points in pre-centered calculation — 89 points lower than the average in 1941.

How much dumber can America get? Unfortunately, as the saying goes, “You ain’t seen nothing yet!”



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