

Test-taking training called good, but caution urged

By EDWAR. T. RINCON

Any college graduate or college-bound high school student can easily relate to the anxiety and competitiveness associated with taking college examinations such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT).

The SAT is frequently used (and abused) by educators in decisions regarding (a) admission to our nation's higher-learning institutions, (b) the award of financial support, especially National Merit Scholarships, (c) the counseling of students about their choice of major or institution, (d) the effectiveness of our teachers and schools, and (e) the general barometer of our nation's educational health. Few would argue successfully that adequate performance on the

SAT is a trivial concern in our test-conscious culture.

In an effort to address this reality, the Dallas Independent School District recently announced plans to offer SAT training to its students for the purpose of improving their performance on the SAT and, presumably, to enhance their opportunities in higher education. According to Lilius Wright, superintendent, studies on SAT training show that "a student who is adequately prepared to take this kind of test can score at least 10 percent higher."

To implement this program, the DISD is considering contracting Stanley Kaplan Educational Services or some other test preparation service to deliver the instruction to district participants.

The school district is to be com-

mended for undertaking this ambitious crusade to improve student performance on such tests.

Indeed, it has been common knowledge in the educational testing community that adequate performance on these tests depends not only on developed verbal and mathematical abilities but also on other critical test-taking factors such as guessing strategies, familiarity with different item formats, time limits, test anxiety, and the state of being adequately reviewed. The general purpose of these short-term instructional programs is to improve the test-taker's "state-of-readiness," thereby increasing the chances that a more accurate assessment of scholastic potential will be made.

My general enthusiasm for SAT training programs, however, is

tempered by the following concerns that have emerged from the study of such programs over the last few years:

- ✓ Studies documenting the effectiveness of SAT training programs have not generally involved commercial coaching schools but rather a variety of instructional contexts. What criteria are being used to select the trainers for the DISD? Evidence of popularity?

- ✓ A clear majority of the studies showing gains from such instruction have not included Hispanics or blacks. What efforts are being made to ensure that the instructional strategy used is appropriate for these subgroups since they comprise a large segment of the DISD?

- ✓ Not all participants benefit

from short-term instructional programs, especially those at the lower and upper-ranges of ability. What screening procedures will be used to ensure that the training will be provided to those participants who would most likely benefit from it?

- ✓ How will the DISD know that the SAT training works? If, for example, Kaplan provides the training and no meaningful gains on the SAT are demonstrated by the participants, will the conclusion be that SAT training does not work, or that the Kaplan method does not work? It will be particularly important that the training program include an evaluative design that will identify successful and unsuccessful program and participant characteristics in addition to the overall assessment of

program effectiveness.

An erroneous or unqualified conclusion of no program gains could do much harm to the participants who could benefit from the instruction but are otherwise unable to afford it.

If properly designed, the proposed SAT training program can provide a much needed service to our college-bound students. Whether an existing service is used or a new one developed, concerted efforts must be made to ensure that the program is given a fair chance to demonstrate its effectiveness and applicability to our diverse DISD population.

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