

SREB

Improving ACT and SAT Scores:

*Making Progress,
Facing Challenges*

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Southern
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Board

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A FOCUS REPORT IN THE *CHALLENGE TO LEAD* SERIES

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This report is part of the *Challenge to Lead* education goals series, directed by Joan Lord. A full list of the goals, with publications describing SREB states' progress toward them, is printed on the inside back cover. For more information, e-mail joan.lord@sreb.org. *Goals for Education: Challenge to Lead* also is available on the SREB Web site at www.sreb.org.

Improving ACT and SAT Scores: *Making Progress, Facing Challenges*

How do you know if your state's high school graduates are prepared for college? Are their college admission examination scores improving, and are achievement gaps closing among groups of students as measured by these tests?

Adapted from *Goals for Education: Challenge to Lead*

SREB's *Challenge to Lead* Goals for Education call for more students to take college admission tests, to score higher on those tests and for SREB states to reduce gaps in test scores among all groups of students. For states, achieving higher statewide scores is one sign that more students can go on to college. For students, higher individual scores are critical to increasing opportunities for college acceptance and scholarships.

This report looks at the underlying factors driving a state's college admission test scores, helps you as a policy-maker and an education leader understand the most recent test results, and makes recommendations for improvement.

College admission test scores in SREB states generally have improved in the past decade. But in most states they still have not reached the national average. Closing performance gaps among all groups of students also remains an issue for both the nation and the region. Understanding why these trends continue is essential to addressing these challenges.

Several factors influence state average test scores. First, either the ACT or the SAT is "dominant" in each state — meaning that more than half of the students elect to take that test. The ACT is dominant in eight SREB states; the SAT in the other eight. You as a policy-maker should focus primarily on the test that is dominant in your state. (See Table 1 for your state's dominant test.)

In addition, every student decides whether to take a test and which one to take. Some take neither, and some take both. Traditionally, the students who opt to take a test are those who have the specific intent of qualifying for college admission and merit scholarships. This means that they are not a random — or chance — group. When the percentage of students tested in a state is small, the students typically are the most motivated and academically prepared students in the state, and the state average score is typically a higher-than-average score. As more students in a state take the dominant test — and the group taking the test more nearly represents a cross-section of students in the state — the state average score usually drops. It's important for policy-makers to keep in mind what proportion of all students in your

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state took the dominant test. The proportion differs significantly from state to state for several reasons. For example, two-year colleges in some states require students to take a college admission test, and others do not. From time to time, some states also have required all high school juniors or seniors to take one of the tests. Kentucky will require all juniors to take the ACT beginning in 2007.

The demographic mix of students taking the tests in each state affects state scores statistically, too. As more students take the tests, the additional students are more likely to be from groups who have not gone to college in large numbers: students from low-income families, members of minority racial/ethnic groups, and students with disabilities. SREB states — and many others across the nation — have not yet closed the gaps in standardized test results for these groups. The proportions of these groups also vary significantly among states. For example, in 2004 the percentage of students in Mississippi who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunches — a key measure of low-income family status — was 71 percent, more than double the percentage in Maryland. This means that Maryland can expect less impact on its state average score as more students take its dominant college admission test than can Mississippi, because fewer students from low-income families are likely to be in the test-taking group.

In sum, it is important for you to analyze trends within your own state and not compare them too closely with those in other states. As you analyze scores for your state's dominant test, you should compare your state data with national trends. (See Table 1 for the percentages of students taking your state's dominant test.)

As a policy-maker and an education leader, you should focus on two key questions as you seek ways to increase these test scores in your state:

- Are students in my state improving on my state's dominant college admission test?
- Are achievement gaps closing for all groups?

FIRST QUESTION:

Are students in my state improving on my state's dominant college admission test?

The general trend in ACT and SAT¹ scores in SREB states — as reported for both public and private school students — is up. In the last decade, 12 of the 16 SREB states either improved or kept constant the average scores on their dominant tests.

¹ SAT refers to the SAT I reading and math sections only. A voluntary writing section was added in 2006, too recently to be considered in this analysis of score trends. See the box on Page 5 for the writing scores for the eight SAT-dominant SREB states.

The Proportions of High School Seniors Taking the ACT and SAT Vary in SREB States.

- In **Mississippi** in 2006, 93 percent of seniors — nearly all of the graduating class — took the ACT; 4 percent took the SAT.
- In **Texas** in 2006, 52 percent of seniors took the SAT; 29 percent took the ACT.

When compared with national average ACT and SAT scores, the improvement in SREB states also is significant. In 1997, none of the SREB states surpassed the national average score for its dominant test. In 2006, one SREB state, Virginia, surpassed the national average, and eight other SREB states — Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia — narrowed their gaps with the nation. In all but three SREB states, the percentages of graduating seniors taking the dominant test increased. Most remarkably, scores improved at the same time that the percentages of students taking the tests increased in eight SREB states — Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia. (See Table 1.)

Virginia beat the national average on its dominant test, and eight other SREB states narrowed their gaps with the nation.

Table 1

ACT-Dominant States						SAT-Dominant States					
	1997		2006		Score Change		1997		2006		Score Change
	Average Score	Percent Tested	Average Score	Percent Tested			Average Score	Percent Tested	Average Score	Percent Tested	
U.S. ¹	21.0	37	21.1	40	0.1	U.S. ¹	1016	43	1021	48	5
AL	20.2	69	20.2	79	0	DE	1003	70	995	73	-8
AR	20.3	70	20.6	75	0.3	FL	998	52	993	65	-5
KY	20.1	68	20.6	76	0.5	GA	967	69	990	70	23
LA	19.4	78	20.1	74	0.7	MD	1014	66	1012	70	-2
MS	18.7	82	18.8	93	0.1	NC	978	63	1008	71	30
OK	20.6	69	20.5	72	-0.1	SC	953	65	985	62	32
TN	19.7	88	20.7	93	1.0	TX	995	67	997	52	2
WV	20.0	58	20.6	64	0.6	VA	1003	67	1025	73	22

¹ U.S. average scores reflect all student scores for that test nationwide, not just those from states in which the test is dominant. SAT scores do not reflect the voluntary writing section that was added in 2006.

Sources: ACT Inc. and the College Board.

How Are SREB States Doing?

- **Virginia** was the only SREB state with an average score in 2006 that topped the national average for its dominant test.
- Six ACT states — **Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee and West Virginia**, and four SAT states — **Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia** — kept pace or gained ground on the national average for their dominant test.
- Two ACT states — **Alabama and Mississippi** — and one SAT state — **Florida** — increased the percentage of high school seniors tested by at least 10 percentage points.

Groups of students also made noteworthy score improvements. In the past 10 years, black students increased their average scores on their state's dominant test in 12 of the 16 SREB states. The average scores of white students went up in 14 of the states, and those of Hispanic students rose in seven. (See Table 2.)

Table 2

White and Black Students Improved Their Scores More Than Hispanic Students							
		White		Black		Hispanic	
	Percent of All Seniors Tested	2006 Average Score	Score Change Since 1997	2006 Average Score	Score Change Since 1997	2006 Average Score	Score Change Since 1997
ACT-Dominant States							
AL	79	21.3	0.1	17.2	0.2	20.3	-0.3
AR	75	21.5	0.4	16.9	0.1	18.9	-.02
KY	76	20.9	0.5	17.1	0.1	19.5	-.01
LA	74	21.3	0.6	17.2	0.5	20.3	0.8
MS	93	20.3	0.1	16.5	0.2	19.6	0.5
OK	72	21.2	0	17.0	-0.2	18.3	-1.4
TN	93	21.5	0.9	17.1	0.7	19.8	0.9
WV	64	20.7	0.6	17.7	0.6	21.3	1.1
SAT-Dominant States							
DE	73	1035	1	835	-16	909	-14
FL	65	1039	-4	855	-1	955	-29
GA	70	1045	29	862	24	937	-9
MD	70	1087	15	848	-11	984	-37
NC	71	1058	35	857	23	942	-20
SC	62	1034	24	849	27	955	6
TX	52	1063	17	861	13	920	14
VA	73	1065	23	867	22	1018	4

Sources: ACT Inc. and the College Board.

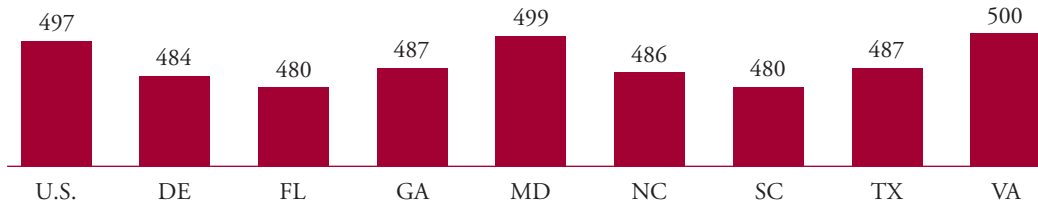
How Are SREB States Doing?

- All three groups of students — black, Hispanic and white students — improved their average composite scores on the dominant test in seven SREB states — **Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia.**
- White students improved their average scores in every SREB state except **Florida and Oklahoma.**
- Average scores on the dominant test declined for both black and Hispanic students in four SREB states — **Delaware, Florida, Maryland and Oklahoma.**

*Maryland and Virginia Exceeded the National Average
on the Writing Section of the SAT.*

In 2006, writing scores were included in the SAT score report for the first time. Average scores in two SREB states beat the national average. A perfect writing score is 800.

SAT Writing Scores, 2006



Source: The College Board.

Student participation in college admission testing increased in all three groups in SREB states, too. The number of white students taking the ACT rose 10 percent over the period, while the increases in percentage of black and Hispanic students taking the tests were even more dramatic for both tests. (See Table 3.)

- In ACT-dominant SREB states, the number of Hispanic students tested increased 66 percent from 1997 to 2006. Nearly 1,800 more Hispanic students took the ACT in 2006 than in 1997. Approximately 6,600 more black students took the test that year, a 19 percent increase.
- In SAT-dominant SREB states, the number of black and Hispanic students tested increased 44 percent and 43 percent, respectively. An additional 24,200 black students and 7,000 more Hispanic students took the SAT in 2006, compared with 1997.

Table 3

**Significantly More Black and Hispanic Students Took the ACT and SAT
in SREB States in 2006 Than in 1997¹**

	ACT			SAT		
	1997	2006	Percent Increase	1997	2006	Percent Increase
Black	35,049	41,645	19	54,889	79,121	44
Hispanic	2,681 ²	4,460 ²	66	16,407 ³	23,454 ³	43
White	139,528	153,457	10	201,839	257,302	27

¹ Numbers reflect those taking each state's dominant test.

² In 1997, ACT reported the number of "Mexican-American/Chicano" and "Puerto Rican" students tested as two groups. The number reported for 1997 is the sum of those two groups. By 2006, ACT had combined the groups and now refers to the combined group as "Hispanic."

³ SAT defines these students as "Mexican-American." SAT reports separately for Puerto Rican students.

Sources: ACT Inc. and the College Board.

State-by-state analyses show notable differences among SREB states, based on their demographic profiles. In all but two SREB states, the percentage growth of black and Hispanic students taking the dominant tests exceeded the growth of white students taking these tests. Seven SREB states more than doubled the number of Hispanic students taking the dominant tests in their state, and seven SREB states had at least 40 percent more black students taking the dominant tests. It is important to note that since many states had a relatively small number of Hispanic students tested, increases — while substantial — produced dramatic percentage gains. Only one SREB state, Florida, had a comparably dramatic increase — 55 percent — in the number of white students taking its dominant test. North Carolina had the next largest increase in the percent of white students tested, at 31 percent. (See Table 4.)

Table 4

More Black, Hispanic and White Students Took College Admission Tests in Most SREB States in 2006						
	White		Black		Hispanic	
	Students Tested	Change in Percent Tested Since 1997	Students Tested	Change in Percent Tested Since 1997	Students Tested	Change in Percent Tested Since 1997
ACT-Dominant States						
AL	21,664	21	8,240	36	374	66
AR	15,068	15	3,297	24	579	136
KY	24,611	11	2,248	24	398	64
LA	20,136	1	8,862	-1	716	8
MS	13,062	9	8,558	20	237	39
OK	16,966	6	2,155	40	1,279	110
TN	32,350	14	7,952	20	791	78
WV	9,600	-5	333	1	86	1
SAT-Dominant States						
DE	4,208	19	1,114	56	52	300
FL	49,721	55	12,575	81	1,043	193
GA	33,396	22	14,600	42	634	222
MD	23,380	29	10,834	49	225	142
NC	34,065	31	10,858	47	486	305
SC	15,169	13	5,496	-4	116	100
TX	63,273	20	14,474	49	20,511	33
VA	34,090	20	9,170	33	387	95

Sources: ACT Inc. and the College Board.

How Are SREB States Doing?

- Eight states had increases of at least 100 percent in the number of Hispanic students taking college admission tests.
- Thirteen states had increases of 20 percent or more in the number of black students tested.
- Seven states had increases of 20 percent or more in the number of white students tested.

SECOND QUESTION:

Are achievement gaps closing for all groups?

While overall average scores tell us that, as a whole, students in SREB states are performing better on ACT and SAT tests, and while group averages tell us that black, Hispanic and white students also are generally improving, these averages do not tell us if all groups are making progress at the same rate and whether gaps are closing.

The disappointing news is that from 1997 to 2006, the score gains of black and Hispanic students did not match those of white students. In fact, in most cases, they fell far short of closing gaps. Among the eight SAT-dominant SREB states, white students made larger gains than black students in six states, and they made larger gains than Hispanic students in all eight. In the eight ACT-dominant SREB states, white students made larger gains than black students in five states, and they made larger gains than Hispanic students in four. (See Tables 5-8.)

The disappointing news is that from 1997 to 2006, the score gains of black and Hispanic students did not match those of white students.

Table 5

Point Change in Average Composite ACT Scores From 1997 to 2006 for Black and White Students in ACT-Dominant States

	U.S.	AL	AR	KY	LA	MS	OK	TN	WV
Black students	0	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.5	0.2	-0.2	0.7	0.6
White students	0.3	0.1	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.1	0	0.9	0.6
Did gaps close?		✓				✓			

Source: ACT Inc.

- In five states, white students made greater or equal score gains than black students.
- In one state, the score of black students declined and that of white students held steady.
- ✓ *In two states, black students made greater gains than white students and narrowed the gap in performance.*

Table 6

**Point Change in Average Composite ACT Scores From 1997 to 2006 for
Hispanic and White Students in ACT-Dominant States**

	U.S.	AL	AR	KY	LA	MS	OK	TN	WV
Hispanic students	-0.3	-0.3	-0.2	-0.1	0.8	0.5	-1.4	0.9	1.1
White students	0.3	0.1	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.1	0	0.9	0.6
Did gaps close?					✓	✓			✓

Source: ACT Inc.

- In four states, white students made score gains or held steady and scores of Hispanic students declined.
- In one state, both groups made equal gains.
- ✓ *In three states, Hispanic students made greater gains than white students and narrowed the gap in performance.*

Table 7

**Point Change in Average Composite SAT Scores From 1997 to 2006 for
Black and White Students in SAT-Dominant States**

	U.S.	DE	FL	GA	MD	NC	SC	TX	VA
Black students	6	-16	-1	24	-11	23	27	13	22
White students	11	1	-4	29	15	35	24	17	23
Did gaps close?			*				✓		

Source: The College Board.

- In four states, white students made greater score gains than black students.
- In two states, white students' scores increased and black students' scores declined.
- * In one state, both white and black students' scores declined. Although scores for white students declined more, and gaps between groups narrowed, neither group made progress toward achievement targets.
- ✓ *In one state, black students made greater gains than white students and narrowed the gap in performance.*

Table 8

Point Change in Average Composite SAT Scores From 1997 to 2006 for Hispanic and White Students in SAT-Dominant States

	U.S.	DE	FL	GA	MD	NC	SC	TX	VA
Hispanic students	10	-14	-22	-9	-37	-20	6	14	4
White students	11	1	-4	29	15	35	24	17	23
Did gaps close?									

Source: The College Board.

- In three states, white students made greater score gains than Hispanic students.
- In four states, the scores of white students increased and those of Hispanic students declined.
- In one state, both white and Hispanic students' scores declined, but the score of white students declined less.
- Gaps did not narrow in any state.

It is disappointing that — in most cases — gaps in performance on the ACT and SAT for black and Hispanic students did not narrow from 1997 to 2006 in SREB states. But it is not altogether surprising. The demographic profile of SREB states changed dramatically during those years. The student profile of elementary and secondary schools also changed and was reflected in high school graduating classes. By 2004, over 50 percent of students in K-12 schools in SREB states were eligible for free and reduced-price lunches. In 1990, 39 percent were eligible. The number of black graduates increased by 22 percent and Hispanic graduates by 77 percent in SREB states, compared with a 7 percent increase in white graduates. (See Table 9.)

Table 9

The Changing Profile of High School Graduates in SREB States

	1997	2006 ¹	Percent Increase
Black	173,311	211,456	22
Hispanic	74,831	132,239	77
White	511,096	545,370	7

¹ Projected totals.

Source: Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2003.

Demographic changes mean that SREB states face a double challenge to improve students' readiness for and access to college. First, to meet the challenge of increasing average college admission test scores (both the overall score and those of specific racial/ethnic groups), states need to improve the scores of students who have historically taken the test and scored low compared with the nation. Second, states need to ensure that the students from fast-growing populations who are added to those taking the tests — including many first-generation college students — are adequately prepared and highly motivated. Otherwise, improvements in college readiness will continue to be slow.

To make more progress, states should:

- improve efforts to help all students take the right courses in high school to be prepared for college to help ensure that their scores are better than in past years; and
- step up the focus on students who are seeking access to college now but whose counterparts in the past did not.

What Can You and Your State Do to Meet These Challenges?

As a policy-maker and an education leader, you can promote a strong foundation of learning for all students at every level so that they make smoother transitions from one grade to the next throughout their education. This work begins with quality prekindergarten programs for students likely to be unprepared for first grade, builds in the early and middle grades through rigorous standards and instructional practices, and continues into high school, with the integration of specific college-readiness standards into the high school curriculum. It means having assessment systems that inform schools and students about student achievement, support systems that ensure students who fall behind are able to catch up, guidance and advisement services that encourage students to attempt challenging courses, and high school leaders and teachers who bring college-readiness standards into the classroom. There are no quick solutions, no sure-fire test-preparation courses and no silver bullets.

Preparing for college study and the workplace — which is more important than preparing for college admission tests — requires that you give immediate attention to the courses students are taking and to the development of college- and career-readiness standards in your state. These standards for reading, writing and mathematics should be embedded in the high school curriculum. Your state high school assessment system should test for them. College admission tests cannot substitute for that. Few states in the nation have done enough to ensure that these standards are clearly stated and fully communicated among high schools and colleges. You and other state leaders can ensure that this changes. It will take five bold steps, which are listed below and more fully discussed in the 2007 SREB report *From High School to College and Careers: Aligning State Policies* (available at www.sreb.org).

- 1. Your state's public schools and colleges should develop a single set of reading, writing and mathematics standards that signal what it means for students to be ready for postsecondary education.**
- 2. Your state needs to adopt and embed college- and career-readiness standards in the state high school curriculum as an integral part of state high school standards, not just as items that are aligned or correlated with them.**

3. All public colleges and universities, including community colleges, should adopt the readiness standards and use them to determine students' course placement based on their readiness for college-level work.
4. Your state should test student performance on the college- and career-readiness standards before the senior year of high school, so that those who fall short have time to strengthen their skills.
5. Your state should provide substantial professional development to help teachers understand the standards and know how to incorporate them into classroom teaching.

The progress over the last decade in SREB states has provided a strong foundation on which to build. Student scores *have* improved. Student participation in college admission testing *has increased* — particularly among minority students. It is time to redouble state efforts so that your state can close gaps among student groups and with the nation. Focusing on all students groups and on specific college- and career-readiness standards in your state is the key.

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Challenge to Lead Goals for Education

The reports listed below for each goal, and other reports on the goals, are found at www.sreb.org.

1. All children are ready for the first grade.
Building a Foundation for Success by Getting Every Child Ready for School
2. Achievement in the early grades for all groups of students exceeds national averages and performance gaps are closed.
Mastering Reading and Mathematics in the Early Grades
3. Achievement in the middle grades for all groups of students exceeds national averages and performance gaps are closed.
Getting the Mission Right in the Middle Grades
4. All young adults have a high school diploma — or, if not, pass the GED tests.
Getting Serious About High School Graduation
5. All recent high school graduates have solid academic preparation and are ready for post-secondary education and a career.
Getting Students Ready for College and Careers
6. Adults who are not high school graduates participate in literacy and job-skills training and further education.
Investing Wisely in Adult Learning is Key to State Prosperity
7. The percentage of adults who earn postsecondary degrees or technical certificates exceeds national averages.
Creating College Opportunity for All: Prepared Students and Affordable Colleges
8. Every school has higher student performance and meets state academic standards for all students each year.
Focusing on Student Performance Through Accountability
9. Every school has leadership that results in improved student performance — and leadership begins with an effective school principal.
Progress Being Made in Getting a Quality Leader in Every School
10. Every student is taught by qualified teachers.
Resolve and Resources to Get a Qualified Teacher in Every Classroom
11. The quality of colleges and universities is regularly assessed and funding is targeted to quality, efficiency and state needs.
Holding Colleges and Universities Accountable for Meeting State Needs
12. The state places a high priority on an education system of schools, colleges and universities that is accountable.
From Goals to Results: Improving Education System Accountability

The Southern Regional Education Board has established these Goals for Education. They are built on the groundbreaking education goals SREB adopted in 1988 and on an ongoing effort to promote actions and measure progress. The new goals raise further the sights of the 16 SREB states and challenge them to lead the nation.

