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U.S. College Test at Center of Race-Charged Debate

By Alan Elsner, National Correspondent

WASHINGTON – As American high school students nervously await acceptance letters from colleges this month, the SAT aptitude test that is central to the admissions process is embroiled in a racially charged debate.

Reflecting the sensitivity of the issue, the name of the test itself has changed over the years. The initials SAT used to stand for Scholastic Aptitude Test. In 1990 that was changed to Scholastic Achievement Test. Six years later the College Board which administers the test, declared the initials no longer stood for anything at all.

Still, 1.3 million high school students every year take the test, which measures knowledge in English and mathematics and is a central criterion in the admissions procedures of most colleges. Colleges will be sending their final acceptance letters to students by April 1.

At the heart of the debate is the painful and politically inconvenient fact that black and Hispanic students score considerably below their Asian and white counterparts, even when their family income is similar.

University of California president Richard Atkinson set off the latest round in a long-running controversy in February when he proposed dropping the SAT for the California state college system's 133,000 undergraduate students.

"America's overemphasis on the SAT is compromising our educational system," Atkinson said in a speech to the American Council on Education.

Atkinson said he had been appalled during a visit to an upscale school to see 12-year-olds drilling for a test most would only take four years later. Wealthy families often spend hundreds of dollars to enroll their children in cramming courses that guarantee to raise scores. Such opportunities are not available for poorer students.

"Many universities, faced with having to choose among thousands of highly qualified applicants, give too much weight to the SAT ... Students should be judged on what they have accomplished during four years of high school, taking into account their opportunities," Atkinson argued.

A number of other college administrators said they would consider following California's example, though most seem determined to stick to the SAT as the only nationally accepted criterion of student achievement. Many colleges compete for high-scoring students to boost their own standings in the increasingly competitive college ranking systems.

To conservative critics, Atkinson's arguments were merely shorthand for offering preferential treatment to minorities. California and some other states banned using racial preferences in the admissions process several years ago. As a result, some of the more elite colleges have become even whiter than before.

"The problem for African-Americans is not the SAT. It is inferior education before they get to the SAT," wrote lawyer Stuart Taylor in the National Journal magazine.

"Beyond that, it is the terribly self-destructive disdain for academic effort ('acting white') manifested by many black students, including a lot of bright middle-class black students from good schools," he wrote.

Among students entering college in 1999, blacks scored an average of 93 points below whites in the verbal section of the test. Blacks scored, on average, 106 points below whites in mathematics. Each section carries a maximum of 800 points.

Historically, the black-white test score gap narrowed between 1976 and the late 1980s. Then it began to widen again. Some researchers suggest that mounting teenage violence among blacks might have contributed to the widening of the gap at that time.

Psychologists have tried to look for reasons other than educational opportunity to explain the discrepancy and have zeroed in on what they call "stereotype threat" — a phenomenon by which a student who feels he is part of a group that has been negatively stereotyped is likely to perform less well.

For example, Stanford psychology professor Claude Steele conducted experiments in which black and white students are brought in to take a standardized test.

The first time, he tells the students that they will be taking a test to measure their verbal and reasoning ability. The second time, he tells them the test is an unimportant research tool. Steele found that the black students do less well when they are told that the test measures their abilities.

This led Time Magazine columnist Jack E. White to argue passionately that dropping the SAT test would be bad for blacks because it might strengthen the idea that they cannot compete.

"There's simply no excuse for black youngsters with college-educated parents to perform worse than white youths whose folks only finished high school," he wrote.

"We've got to believe that even at their most bigoted, whites never came up with a test blacks couldn't ace, including the SAT. We've got to make second-class scholarship and low test scores as intolerable to us as second-class citizenship used to be."