



WHY REPLACING MAINE’S 11TH-GRADE ASSESSMENT WITH THE SAT IS A GOOD IDEA—EVEN IF IT IS NOT A PERFECT SOLUTION

The Maine Educational Assessment (MEA) tests were created as part of the Educational Reform Act of 1984, and were first administered to Maine students in grades 4, 8, and 11 during the 1988–89 academic year. Later, following the adoption of the State of Maine *Learning Results* (MLR) in 1996, the tests were revised to measure whether students are meeting state-mandated learning standards. The *Learning Results* are a challenging and forward-thinking set of standards for evaluating the knowledge and skills that Maine students should have at various stages of their public-school education. When the MLR legislation was enacted, the new law gave Maine a higher set of standards for what its publicly funded education system should provide, and these standards remain as important today as they were nearly a decade ago.

But much has changed since 1996.

The intention of the MLR is to provide every Maine student—regardless of their location, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or any other peripheral factor—with equitable access to a high-quality public education. After the new standards were adopted, Maine began assessing students according to more demanding measures, although many of the high schools and academic programs, which were supposed to better prepare students to meet these tougher standards, changed little or not at all. While the MLR is highly descriptive about what Maine students need to know, the standards do not outline the specific steps that schools must take to provide the kind of challenging, equitable, relevant, and personalized academic programs that will ensure that all Maine students are able to achieve the *Learning Results*.

When it replaces the 11th-grade MEA, the College Board’s SAT will become only one component of Maine’s Comprehensive Assessment System. State law requires that student performance be continually monitored through a variety of means at both the state and local levels. The MEA is the state-level assessment strategy, and the tests that have already been developed will continue to be administered in grades 4 and 8. Since the SAT does not test for science competency, the SAT will likely either be modified or the science component of the MEA will be retained. The Local Assessment System will continue to track academic performance—as well as achievement in social studies, health, art, and physical education—through measures such as reports, projects, presentations, portfolios, and content-specific tests, all of which must be aligned with the MLR. Maine is not abandoning the MLR or the MEA systems; the SAT is merely replacing one test among many.

WHY IS THE SAT A GOOD IDEA?

The SAT has the potential to enhance the opportunities available to Maine youth in ways that the MEA cannot. A college education is now more important than it ever has been in our nation's history. Local economies are giving way to a rapidly developing global market that is demanding ever higher levels of education; the international marketplace is so competitive that the United States is struggling to keep up with thriving industries in such places as Singapore, China, Ireland, India, and the Scandinavian countries—countries, not surprisingly, that have invested heavily in education during the past few decades. We cannot afford to rest on our laurels.

Increasingly, jobs that were once considered blue collar now require some form of post-secondary training, as well as much higher levels of literacy, technological skill, and mathematical ability than have historically been the case. In other words, *college readiness and work readiness have become one in the same*.

We need to prepare students not only to meet state standards, but to enter a complex and challenging world that may not recognize the value of even the best public-school education Maine can provide.

Maine has made great strides in improving the quality of its public-education system over the past decade, and it is quickly becoming a nationally recognized leader in educational innovation and high academic standards. Beginning with *Promising Futures* and the *Learning Results*, our state has certainly increased student access and academic expectations within its public-school system. The progress we made so far is admirable, but that does not mean our work is done. True progress requires ongoing self-assessment and a willingness to embrace new approaches to old problems. When the SAT becomes the 11th-grade assessment test, Maine will not be abandoning or undermining this considerable progress; to the contrary, Maine will be affirming and extending the good work that has already been accomplished by the Legislature, the Maine Department of Education, the school administrative districts, and our many devoted educators.

Our collective ability to take risks and remain adaptive to changing needs has been the driving force behind these many achievements, and the SAT is the logical next step in Maine's continuing efforts to improve its public-education system.

Both the SAT and the MEA are compromises, not ideal solutions. We need to ask ourselves, as a state and a community, which of these two compromises will provide the greatest benefit to our students now and in the long run? That is the only important consideration.

Our state is not a closed system. If Maine is to have a stable, sustainable, and successful economy, we cannot remain isolated—we need to connect, integrate, and collaborate, while also sending far more of our youth on to college. The SAT was not developed in Maine, but it has long been one of the nationally recognized gateways to a collegiate education. In 11th grade, our lawmakers, educators, and parents need to know if Maine students are ready for college, work, citizenship, and success in life whether they choose to remain in Maine or not. The SAT can help connect our students to the larger world, a world that is becoming ever more interconnected with each passing year. Unlike a score on the MEA, a SAT score is a portable asset, something all our students can take with them as they embark on the journey of adulthood. The education of Maine citizens does not, and should not, end with state learning standards. To remain competitive,

Maine must take a long-range perspective, one that not only looks beyond the borders of our state but well into the future.

GIVING STUDENTS MORE OPTIONS

The MEA is a tool that our state uses to evaluate the effectiveness of its educational programs. While it is useful to lawmakers and educators, what does it offer our youth? High school students have no personal investment in the MEA; no matter how well or how poorly they perform, it does not affect their grades or future options. Which raises the question: If the students are not personally invested, can the test accurately measure their ability? For most high school students the MEA is merely *one more test*. Federal law requires the state to assess student performance, but it allows the states some latitude in determining how to assess that performance. By taking advantage of this flexibility in federal requirements, Maine has the opportunity to make it easier for many more students to transition into higher education by helping them overcome one more barrier standing between high school and college. In an era of expanding high-stakes testing, as well as competitive job markets and college-admissions standards, requiring the SAT will mean one fewer test—and one fewer obstacle—for our students to overcome.

Roughly 85% of Maine students graduate from high school, and more than 75% already take the SAT. However, only 53% will actually enroll in college, and a mere 30% will earn a bachelor's degree. These dwindling percentages reveal a serious disconnect between high school and college in Maine. Apparently, a majority of our secondary students already recognize the value of higher education as juniors and seniors—given that three quarters of Maine high school students sit for the SAT—but more than half of those students with post-secondary aspirations fail to earn a bachelor's degree. This disconnect is especially evident when it comes to our financially disadvantaged, geographically isolated, and first-generation college-bound youth. There are often numerous obstacles to a college education, especially for students whose parents may not have earned post-secondary degrees, and every additional barrier that separates Maine students from an advanced degree makes the ultimate goal exponentially more difficult to achieve. We need to find new ways to place a college education within reach of every Maine student. By providing the SAT at no direct cost to our youth or their families, we eliminate one more hurdle that might stand between high school and higher education. Endorsing the SAT is not only a strong stance on the importance of education beyond public school, but it is also a practical step that will move the state closer to the goal of graduating all students prepared for college and work, as well as a life of active, engaged, and informed citizenship.

A quarter of Maine students do not take the SAT, which means that one-fourth of our student population has no idea how well they would do if they took the test. This figure also implies that one-quarter of our students are most likely not considering higher education an option. This is unfortunate since there is strong evidence to suggest that many more Maine students are capable of succeeding in college. In 2004, the Preliminary SAT (PSAT) was made available at no cost to all Maine high school students, and it will soon become a mandatory test in October 2006. Although concern was expressed about the potential negative impact of this initiative, it turned out that even though the number of students taking the test increased by 272% (from about 20% of all Maine students to about 70%), the average test scores fell only a few percentage points—a trend that would likely carry over to the SAT. Traditionally, only the higher-achieving students with college intentions have taken the PSAT. Yet now that almost three-quarters of Maine

students take this preparatory test, the results clearly show that another 50% of Maine students are just as capable of succeeding in college as the former “high-achieving” 20%.

THE ORIGINAL INTENT OF MAINE’S *LEARNING RESULTS*

As the title of the 1996 MLR statute implies, “An Act to Initiate Education Reform in Maine” has far broader intentions than simply mandating a more challenging set of learning measures. The MLR content standards were never meant to become an end in themselves; in fact, they were to become the foundation of a far more expansive movement to increase the quality and performance of public education in Maine. Let us, for a moment, turn to the language of the original law:

The Legislature, therefore, encourages the State Board of Education, the Department of Education and school administrative units to employ a high degree of creativity in developing content standards and performance indicators and to explore a wide range of programs and options so that the standards adopted will reflect the highest possible expectations and assessments will be of the highest possible quality. The ultimate goal and intent of the Legislature is to ensure that the State’s schools will enable today’s students to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to be effective parents, citizens, workers, and adults. (An Act to Initiate Education Reform in Maine, Sec. 1. 20-A MRSA §§6208)

As this passage shows, the MLR content standards were intended to promote high standards for academic preparedness across the state and to serve as general indicators of student achievement; they were not necessarily meant to become a curricular checklist. Rote mastery of the MLR content standards, or even a high score on the MEA, does not equate with preparedness for college or the workplace. As the preface to the *Learning Results* points out: “[the *MLR*] are not written to prescribe a minimum or ‘passing’ standard. The setting of minimum requirements is the function of assessments that are separate from the creation of academic goals.” Assessments that are aligned with standards can be helpful indicators, but they do not automatically tell us if our students have the “knowledge and skills necessary to be effective parents, citizens, workers, and adults.” That is why we need more ambitious and far-reaching academic goals: the MLR’s Guiding Principles.

The Guiding Principles mandate that Maine students must graduate high school as (1) clear and effective communicators, (2) self-directed and life-long learners, (3) creative and practical problem solvers, (4) responsible and involved citizens, (5) collaborative and quality workers, and (6) integrative and informed thinkers. Numbers 2, 4, and 5 are achieved through exposure to the kinds of holistic learning experiences that go well beyond academics, and that can only be truly assessed at the local level. But the remaining three principles are what the SAT was designed to evaluate—clear and effective communication, creative and informed thinking, and practical problem-solving skills. Arguably, the SAT can measure whether these goals have been achieved just as well as the MEA.

The MLR legislation passed in 1996 also specifically states that the State Board of Education, the Department of Education, and the school administrative units must “explore a wide range of programs and options so that the standards adopted will reflect the highest possible expectations and the assessments will be of the highest possible quality.” Replacing the MEA with the SAT

meets this stipulation, and shows that the State is continuing to explore new options that support *the highest possible expectations*. In the 21st century, the highest possible expectations that Maine can promote are (1) every student graduates academically prepared to enter a post-secondary degree program, and (2) every student actually pursues and attains post-secondary credentials. The SAT will help to encourage more students to enroll in higher education, which is a benefit that the MEA simply cannot offer. By making continued education beyond high school more accessible to more Maine students, the Department of Education is attempting to fulfill this obligation to promote the highest possible expectations for every student.

WHAT DOES THE SAT MEASURE?

Much of the criticism directed at the move to replace the 11th-grade MEA with the SAT has been focused on whether the SAT will satisfy Maine law and accurately assess mastery of curricula aligned with the recommended MLR content standards. The concern is that the SAT is an “aptitude” test—not a test designed to gauge whether students are meeting Maine learning standards—and this is certainly a valid concern. It is true that the SAT was originally designed to measure reasoning and “aptitude”—specifically critical-thinking, problem-solving, and other skills that provide some indication of a student’s ability to succeed in higher education—not mastery of any specific curriculum. However, the SAT was recently modified to reflect what is being taught in schools and to more accurately assess the changing set of skills and knowledge needed to succeed in college and the 21st-century workplace (these changes included excising the verbal-analogy section, while adding more algebra skills and a writing sample). This is also why the SAT is no longer called the “Scholastic Aptitude Test,” but simply the SAT.

While the SAT does (again, arguably) measure academic potential in addition to achievement, it is not an I.Q. or “intelligence” test, although that has been a common mischaracterization. At the same time, increasing the tendency, capacity, or inclination our students to learn and understand—in other words, general academic “aptitude”—are in fact the intended goals of the MLR, as exemplified by the Guiding Principles.

A recent evaluation conducted by the College Board (a second, independent review is planned for the near future) showed a high degree of alignment between the MEA and the SAT, enough to satisfy Federal reporting requirements. In 11th grade, our students have already taken two MEA tests—one of them only three years prior. If the MLR is working as intended, then “achievement” and “aptitude” will be one in the same. As our students prepare to leave the public-school system, Maine should be assessing whether its students have the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in a world governed by different and more demanding measures. Although the SAT may not be a perfect measure of this kind of preparation, it remains a nationally recognized assessment and a gateway to higher education—and some form of higher education is now a prerequisite for entry into nearly any workplace.

MAKING PREPARATION THE TOP PRIORITY

Concern has also been expressed about the possible discouragement a student might feel if they perform poorly on the SAT. But this argument makes little sense in the larger context of today’s highly competitive job market, and especially in the context of the sorting and tracking practices in place in many of our public schools. Is it better to implicitly tell many of our students—from

kindergarten through high school—that they are incapable of succeeding at the level of their peers, that they should lower their expectations, that they are simply not “college material”? Unfortunately, this is precisely what the common practice of tracking students by perceived ability levels does to a large percentage of students. Sorting students in this way is rarely questioned, yet the practice only creates and reinforces a powerful sense of inferiority for many students. And these self-perceptions, created in the crucible of public education, not only place these students at an extreme disadvantage when they graduate, but these lingering self-concepts can continue to haunt our youth throughout their lives.

We should, instead, be asking ourselves if we are doing enough to reverse this legacy. Will one test make much difference when it follows 11 years of institutionalized discouragement? Should we be telling our students to give up before they even try? Is this the message we want to send to our youth?

Public education, even the best public education, will never be able to shelter our youth from the many disappointments of life.

Education should be about preparing all our youth to embrace opportunities, take risks, and achieve goals—it should *not* be about temporarily sheltering them from the inevitable setbacks and frustrations of life. Sheltering students from discouragement and denying them expanded opportunities would be nothing less than irresponsible. This approach would also ill equip students and set them up for predetermined failure. No matter what our youth choose to do with their lives, it is the responsibility of every Maine policy maker, educator, and citizen to give our students every opportunity to succeed. If the potential exists for some students to experience disappointment, then the potential is also present for those same students to unexpectedly experience success. If we attempt to shield them from disappointment, we also deny them opportunities to succeed.

Another concern that has been voiced is that students from low-income households will be disadvantaged by their inability to pay for expensive tutors and test-preparation courses to help them get ready for the SAT. On closer examination, this argument does not make much sense, especially since these low-income students are the same kids who would have to independently pay to take the SAT if it were not subsidized by the state. And while it is true that these students will still not have access to private tutors and expensive prep courses, the Maine Department of Education is already working to address this inequity by planning to offer test-preparation services to *all* Maine students. Far from increasing inequity in our schools, replacing the MEA with the SAT will almost certainly help level the playing field and give far more students an opportunity to prepare for and take the same national proficiency test that most colleges require as a prerequisite for application. As the *Portland Press Herald* reported on September 27, 2005, South Portland High School—which recently began offering the free PSAT as well as a semester-long SAT-preparation course for credit—has experienced a 20% increase (from 68% to 88%) in the number of students attending college in only two years. Reducing obstacles and offering greater support can make a significant difference. It is precisely these kinds of bold decisions—when thoughtfully made in response to changing needs—that can produce undeniable benefits for Maine students.

Consider another little known fact: although some colleges no longer require the SAT for admissions purposes, they continue to use the test to establish a cut-off score for entry into 100-level classes. In other words, incoming students at many colleges need an SAT score or they will

be forced to take a placement test such as Accuplacer. The entire University of Maine System, for example, uses the SAT to determine whether a student can enroll in 100-level courses; these cut-off scores range from 420 to 530 in writing and 450 to 500 in math. If a first-year student does not score above the cut-off point, then they are required to take a remedial—or “developmental”—course, which costs as much as a regular college class but yet does not earn the student credit toward graduation. So while certain institutions no longer “require” the SAT, they still use the test to measure a student’s ability to handle college-level academic work. If an incoming college student misses the cut-off score by even a few points, they must either retake a test such as the SAT, which costs about \$40, or they have to enroll in a remedial course or courses, which can cost several hundred to several thousand dollars. In addition, college students enrolled in developmental courses not only pay far more than their peers, but they also drop out at significantly higher rates.

Again, more than 75% of Maine students already take the SAT—and they already pay for it, as well. This means that three-quarters of Maine students take both the MEA and the SAT, in addition to the PSAT and other tests. The 11th-grade MEA is costly to develop and takes up to an entire school week to administer. The SAT is designed by the College Board, so Maine will not have to subsidize its development, and takes less than four hours on a Saturday to complete. Although there are many complicating factors involved in switching to the SAT and administering an assessment test on a Saturday (such as busing students and making arrangements for special learning needs, etc.), those complications will surely not exceed the hefty investment of time, money, and resources that the MEA already demands of Maine residents and educators. And it will free up nearly an entire school week that would otherwise be absorbed by MEA testing, a week that can then be devoted to teaching and preparing our students to take the next step.

THE SAT IS NOT A PERFECT SOLUTION—BUT THEN NEITHER IS THE MEA

No assessment system will be perfect; compromises are always necessary. Ideally, it would be better to have an 11th-grade assessment that seamlessly dovetailed with Maine’s high learning standards, with the academic programs in place in every one of our public schools, with the standard national college-application process, and with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in college and life after public school. But that’s a tall order. If Maine remains attached to a theoretical ideal—having a home-grown assessment that exclusively and accurately measures state learning standards—then reality is likely to pass us by. The fact that the Department of Education has adopted the SAT is evidence that they are thinking progressively, that they are being responsive to a changing world, and that they are attempting to make the tough decisions that place student needs above the numerous other considerations they, and our devoted educators, are already juggling. It would be easier to let the MEA remain the state’s 11th-grade assessment test, since it is already in place and much of the controversy that it once generated is now in the past. While the SAT may not be a perfect solution, it *is* a bold attempt to mitigate the disconnect that exists not only between public school and higher education in Maine, but also between our most disadvantaged students and the more promising future they all deserve.

Some have expressed the opinion that the Maine Department of Education made its decision to replace the MEA with the SAT too hastily, and they call for more time to weigh the pros and cons and possibly consequences of such a switch. While more time to have discussions and consider options almost always seems like a good idea *in theory*, it is not necessarily the best idea in

practice. The reality is that Maine simply doesn't have the luxury of time. As the rest of the world accelerates its pace, becomes ever more competitive, and graduates unprecedented numbers of youth with higher levels of education and specialized skills, Maine is still debating whether college is "right" for everyone. Although no student should be forced or intimidated into attending college, every student should be encouraged to explore the option, while the State and our public schools should support that process of exploration with proactive policies and programs, not just brochures. College may not be the right choice for everyone, but it *should be a realistic option* for every Maine student who has earned a high school diploma. But that is simply not the case for many adolescents who graduate from Maine high schools without the basic skills necessary for success after high school, or without the support and awareness they need to make an informed decision about their future.

Replacing the MEA will not be easy, and unforeseen complications will almost certainly arise. But those same challenges and complications will still be there two years, five years, or ten years from now. We can either make these tough decisions today, or we will be forced to make even tougher decisions later.

The most urgent educational problems in Maine are the state of our existing public-school programs and our comparatively low college-going rates. Addressing those problems should be our first priority. If our schools are truly working to prepare our students, the proof will not just be higher test scores; it will be evident everywhere we look. If our children go on to college in unprecedented numbers, if our schools become vital and lively community centers, and if Maine's economy is strong and getting stronger, then we will know that our school system is working. As a state, we need to remain focused on the original intention of the MLR—to provide the best education possible to *all* Maine students. Yet we also need to remain mindful that the "best education possible" does not end with the completion of high school. In today's world, the best education possible includes some form of post-secondary degree that can give our youth more options and prepare them to tackle the tough challenges, professional and otherwise, they will inevitably face during their lives. High school can no longer be considered the end of the line for our students, and it should be one of the primary responsibilities of our public-school system to inform students of this reality by giving them—from kindergarten through 12th grade—continuous access to the opportunities, programs, and support services that will inspire them to try harder and reach higher. ■

Why Replacing Maine's 11th-Grade Assessment with the SAT Is a Good Idea—Even If It Is Not a Perfect Solution is a publication of the Great Maine Schools Project. An Executive Summary of the main points expressed in this essay is also available on our Web site: www.greatmainschools.org. Under the Resources section, click Info Briefs.