



Business

Do Md.'s declining SAT math scores tell the full story?

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Special to The Daily Record
November 9, 2007

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This school year began with headlines that read Maryland's SAT scores in math experienced one of the steepest declines in the nation. The articles stated that the scores "dropped significantly" from last year for the "second year in a row" and are now "below students nationally."

Do these scores tell a tale about the state of education in Maryland?

Year after year we hear that states like Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, Wisconsin and South Dakota are greatly outperforming us in the SAT arena. In 2007 Iowa had the highest overall score of 1,807, and South Dakota rounded out the top 5 with an average score of 1,758. Maryland's overall score was 1,498—well behind the top states and below the national average of 1,511. Do the higher scores in the Midwest mean these states have superior school systems?

As the region's economic development partnership, the Economic Alliance of Greater Baltimore is often asked to provide Maryland's SAT scores in comparison to other states' scores. Local businesses recruiting new candidates, site consultants helping companies expand to our region and even residents relocating to the area all want one statistic to validate entire education systems. Time and time again average SAT scores are the statistic of choice. But will this one measurement suffice in determining how well a state's school system is performing? The answer is no. Are there better indicators for measuring a school's performance? The answer is yes.

Maryland encourages more of its students—college-bound or not—to take the SAT. That means we have more and more students participating in the exam each year who come from a wide range of academic backgrounds. Our test-takers are not just those with strong academic performances who are applying to the nation's most selective universities. Maryland strives to have students of all academic levels participating in the exam. And the story goes: as participation rates increase, scores will likely decrease.

Maryland's participation rate of 70 percent ranked the state 12th in the nation. Similarly, the national score of 1,511 was achieved with a student participation rate of just 48 percent. Overall, Maryland has significantly more students taking the exam than the national average.

And remember Iowa with its high score of 1,807? It is one of the lowest ranking states in terms of participation—only 4 percent of its students take the SAT.

What about the other high-scoring states? Participation rates range from as low as 3 percent (South Dakota) to 9 percent (Minnesota)—all well below the national average and Maryland's rate. In the Midwest, the ACT is the primary admissions exam, with only those students expecting to go to the top out-of-state colleges taking the SAT, drastically skewing the scores in these states.

When the Economic Alliance is asked how our education system stacks up, we use a wide variety of resources in addition to the SAT participation rates. Most of them are from outside sources, including:

 Percentage of students taking the SAT who enroll in college: Eighty-one percent of Maryland's students taking the SAT enrolled in college (65 percent enrolled in-state). This alone shows we are producing college-bound graduates in our schools.

 Number of schools ranked at the national level: 78 schools in Maryland made Newsweek's list of the top 1,200 public schools in the nation.

 Percentage of students receiving college credit from Advanced Placement exams: Maryland ranks second nationally with 22 percent of students scoring 3 or higher on Advanced Placement exams, only a fraction behind New York (22.7 percent) and well ahead of the national average of 14.8 percent.

 Education quotient: Expansion Management magazine's comprehensive ranking of public schools across the country ranked the schools in the Washington D.C. region first among large metro areas, which includes suburbs in Maryland, and the Baltimore metro area third.

Just as there is more to a student's future performance in college than the SAT score can determine—GPA, extracurricular activity involvement, work and school balance, or other social indicators—there are also other determinants to how an education system performs than average SAT scores.

There is rarely a situation when just one indicator can define the state of an entire system. Think of it like this: you probably do not purchase a vehicle solely based on its mileage per gallon; you use other performance measures to compare vehicles. Why, then, would we use an average SAT score alone to judge, rank and determine whether a school system is educating its students to the highest level possible?

The key lessons here go a long way in understanding all of our region's assets better. First, don't take every ranking you come across at face value. And second, ask questions, delve deeper to figure out whether the comparison is really apples to apples. Simply put: know what you're looking at and what the real story is behind it.

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