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Education Section

Tutor says practice makes perfect

Prepping high-scoring essays using Chyten's method can be enough to boost scores to heart-thumping numbers.

As they develop a new writing section for the popular SAT I test, College Board officials insist that the test will assess a student's writing ability, even if students prep for it. But such tests have been a windfall for preparation centers such as Chyten's, where students are taught test taking with results that seem to have taken the College Board by surprise.

The writing portion of the new SAT I is being modeled on the SAT II writing test, required by top colleges and currently administered to about 231,000 college-bound seniors a year. The new SAT I will be given to as many as 2.5 million students a year, beginning in March 2005.

"SAT IIs are a very good predictor of how people will do here," said William R. Fitzsimmons, dean of admissions and financial aid at Harvard College. "I think the new SAT will be a better yardstick of what people here have accomplished,

"We do pay a lot of attention to it," said Boston College director of admissions John L. Mahoney Jr. "In many ways, the SAT II writing test helps us to gauge the writing samples we receive. If it's a high score, we expect a stellar essay. We put a lot of stock in it."

Brian Bremen is an associate professor of English at the University of Texas-Austin and a chief reader for the SAT II writing test. He said he has been impressed with the quality of some of the essays he has graded.

"These are beautiful, insightful essays," he said. "You don't know how the kids wrote them in 20 minutes."

Chyten said his students score an average of 747 on the SAT II writing test. His tutors teach students to write for the reader, he said, in this case, the College Board.

Chyten's approach is to begin by imagining how a teacher would grade the essay: If gratuitous alliteration will impress readers, then polish pulsating pieces of prose. If varied sentence structure scores points, do that. Imagine the educators writing the test; what are they getting at with this question?

"Your tutor requires you to make a pact together; it's really a collaboration," said Marissa Greenwald of Brookline, a freshman at Cornell University who studied with a Chyten tutor and also scored 800 on the SAT II writing test.

"For a student to do well, you've got to understand the process, how the College Board grades, their technique, called holistic grading," Chyten said. "Despite what people think, it's 95 percent objective."

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Chyten is making a splash locally. He opened his first center in Newton in 1999 and now has four. He started with 150 students and expects 2,000 this year. Eighty-five percent of last year's junior class at Winsor came to his center for test preparation, he said, and 800 scores on the writing test have been showing up with increasing frequency.

Winsor does not divulge test results, and college counselor Karen Andrews said she does not keep track of which students receive outside tutoring. She did say there have been a lot of 800s recently on the SAT II writing test.