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Rejected by Colleges, SAT and ACT Gain High School Acceptance

By Kate Zernike

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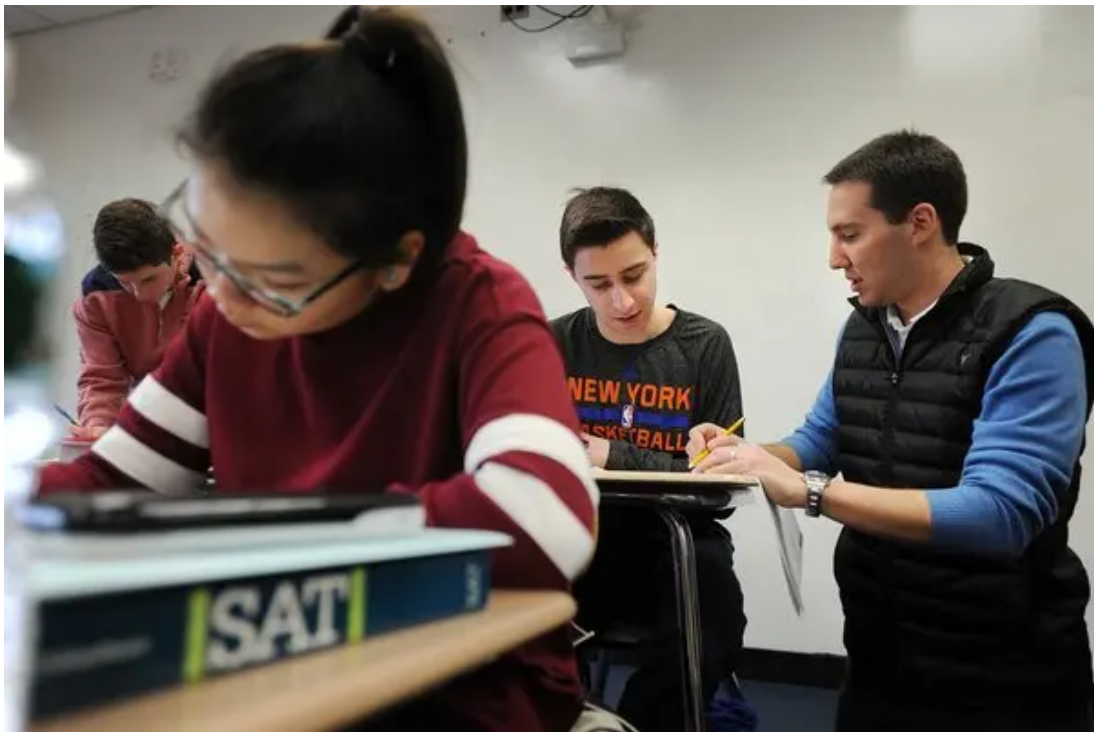

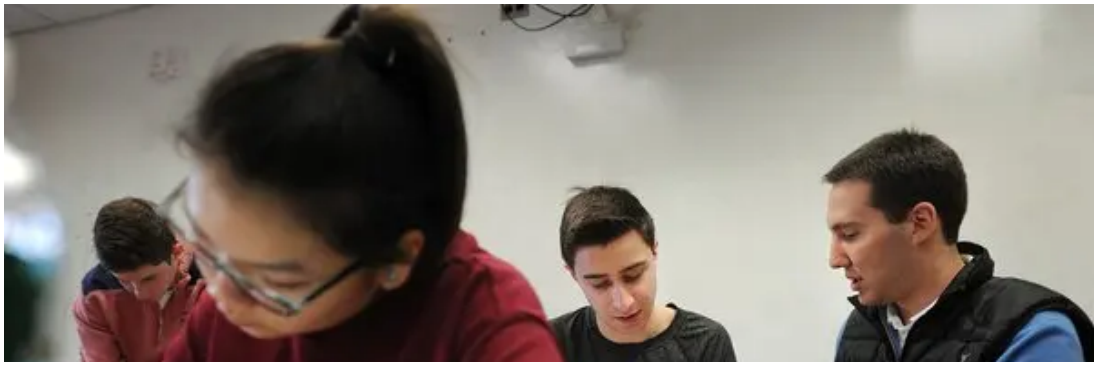

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The SAT and the ACT, bugaboos of generations of college applicants, were supposed to shrink in significance as more colleges and universities moved away from requiring standardized test scores for admission.

Instead, the companies behind them have pushed into the nearly $700-million-a-year market for federally required tests in public schools, offering the SAT and the ACT even to students who do not plan to go to college. Prompted by a recent change in federal education law, they are competing — and increasingly winning — against exams funded by the Obama administration to become mandatory high school tests, used for ranking school performance.

“The testing companies are making a land grab,” said Scott Marion, the executive director of the Center for Assessment, a nonprofit that helps states design and evaluate tests.

Long fierce rivals, the testing companies are seizing an opportunity created by political fights over the Common Core, and the exams based on it. But their moves are raising

questions about how well the ACT and the SAT measure what students are supposed to be learning in high school, and about equity and fairness.

No state illustrates the changing and sometimes contradictory dynamic quite like Delaware. In January, the state board of education announced that it would use the SAT to meet the federal requirement to test high school students. Those students will no longer take Smarter Balanced, one of two national tests the federal government financed to measure how well states were teaching the Common Core, standards for kindergarten through high school that almost every state adopted.

The next month, the University of Delaware announced that it would no longer require in-state students to submit SAT scores, citing research that high school grades better predict college success.

Delaware's decision came on the heels of Montana's announcement in December that high school students would take the ACT instead of Smarter Balanced, and Colorado's decision to have high school students take the SAT instead of the other federally funded Common Core test, known as Parcc, for Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers.

At least seven other states, including Connecticut and Michigan, have said they will use the SAT or the ACT to meet the federal requirement to test high school students.

Legislators in Illinois, Tennessee, Florida and West Virginia have proposed requiring or allowing high school seniors to take the college admissions tests instead of ones tied to common standards.

“It’s a little like the Gold Rush,” Mr. Marion said, adding: “For the SAT and ACT, the way they can really compete is getting a whole state to buy in. Berkeley can do what it wants, but if the SAT is in 50 states, guess what, kids are going to take it.”

It is hard to calculate the size of the market the testing companies are fighting over. Matthew Chingos, a senior fellow at the Urban Institute, added up what states spent to satisfy federal testing requirements in 2012 and came up with a total of $669 million. Adding how much they spent on additional tests, he estimated overall spending at $1.7 billion.

Some researchers argue that states would have saved money by sticking with the national tests, which the Obama administration paid about $350 million to develop — making them free to states in the early years.

But Delaware, for instance, was already paying to provide the SAT to high school students, so it says it will save $100,000 by dropping Smarter Balanced.

In a few states like Delaware that were already giving the SAT or ACT to all high school juniors, getting rid of the Common Core test is, in part, an attempt to address complaints about too much testing. In most states, though, it amounts to replacing one test with another. But those states are betting

that high school students will see the SAT or ACT as more relevant to their lives than the Common Core tests — that they are more interested in looking ahead to college than back on whether they have mastered what they were supposed to learn in elementary and secondary school. For state politicians, the SAT and ACT are also much less politically fraught.

The Common Core has come up against parents who complain of overtesting, students opting out of the tests last spring and conservatives objecting to the standards as a federal intrusion into what they said should be a local issue. Those battles have left only about half the states using one of the national tests.

The reauthorization of the federal law regulating public schools, which President Obama signed in December, still requires states to test students annually in Grades 3 through 8, and once in high school, and to test at least 95 percent of all students. But it allowed them to use what the law termed “nationally recognized” assessments, “such as ACT or SAT exams,” for the high school tests.

Most of the students opting not to take Common Core tests are in high school, and many high school students were already taking the SAT or the ACT. So states are betting that by switching to those tests, they can have higher participation rates — and stem complaints about onerous testing.

“In another time, no one would have raised an eyebrow if kids

took both the SAT and the state test in one year," said Michael Cohen, the president of Achieve, which helped develop the Common Core. "In this political environment, that's much more complicated. People are running from federally funded tests, and the SAT and ACT look like convenient places to run to."

Even before states fled the national tests, the SAT and the ACT were aggressively moving to gain state contracts. The states paid to offer one of the tests free to all high school juniors, which helped increase the number of students taking them, even as colleges move away from requiring their scores.

"They're selling wholesale instead of retail," said Bob Schaeffer, the public education director for FairTest, which favors reducing the number of tests in schools. "Instead of dealing with hundreds of thousands of parents or kids one on one with credit cards, you go to Albany or Hartford or Trenton, you deal with a couple of bureaucrats and suddenly you've got 100,000 kids or more."

In Florida, the legislator behind the bill that would allow students to take the SAT or the ACT instead of the existing state test said the testing companies had helped write the proposed legislation. Edward Colby, a spokesman for the ACT, said it had "offered support for flexibility" in the new federal law, but did not "actively lobby" for the change.

Some states using the ACT or the SAT in high school will

continue to use the federally funded Common Core tests for students in Grades 3 through 8. But the push by the college testing companies has undermined the national exams. In February, Parcc, left with only a handful of states using its test, announced that it would reconsider its mission, trying to diversify to attract more states.

The shift in the state market opens up opportunities for the college testing companies to sell products beyond the SAT and the ACT. This month, the ACT announced a competitor to the College Board's longstanding Preliminary SAT exams, saying it was intended to be sold to states and school districts looking to prepare students for the ACT.

The move toward the college tests has revived longstanding complaints that they favor white students from more affluent families. Also, Mr. Cohen, at Achieve, said it was unclear how well the SAT and the ACT measured the new standards.

The ACT says it remains focused on the original purpose of the college tests, which is to predict how well students will do as freshmen; the College Board says the new SAT is more aligned with state standards.

The secretary of education for Delaware cited the SAT's move away from "obscure vocabulary words" in explaining the decision to use it.

"Our community was clear that this was in the best interest of our high school juniors," said the secretary, Steven Godowsky. "And the sooner we could make the switch, the

better.”

Correction: April 5, 2016

An earlier version of this article misstated the amount that Delaware expects to save by dropping the Smarter Balanced test. It is $100,000, not $100 million. A picture caption with an earlier version of this article misspelled the name of the company running a test-preparation class in Westport, Conn. It is Carnegie Pollak, not Carnegie Pollack.

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