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Sneak Preview

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SAY farewell to vocabulary flashcards with arcane words like “compendious,” “membranous,” “mendacious,” “pugnacious,” “depreciatory,” “redolent,” “treacly” and “jettison.” In the new SAT, to be unveiled in 2015, David Coleman, president of the [College Board](#), wants to get rid of obscure words that are . . . just SAT words, and replace them with more common words like “synthesis,” “distill” and “transform,” used in context as they will be in college and in life.

And the math? “There are a few things that matter disproportionately, like proportional reasoning, linear equations and linear functions,” Mr. Coleman said. “Those are the kinds of things we’re going to concentrate on.”

“And it shouldn’t just be about picking the right answer,” he said. “It should be about being able to explain, and see, the applications of this math.”

Big changes are coming to the nation’s two competing admissions tests.

Mr. Coleman, who became president last October, is intent on rethinking the SAT to make it an instrument that meshes with what students are learning in their classrooms. Meanwhile, the ACT, which has always been more curriculum-based, is the first of the two to move into the digital age. In adapting its test for the computer, ACT Inc. is tiptoeing past the fill-in-the-bubble Scantron sheets toward more creative, hands-on questions.

In their own ways, both organizations are striving to produce something beyond a college admissions test. ACT plans to start yearly testing as early as third grade to help guide students to college readiness. One of Mr. Coleman’s goals is for the College Board to help low-income students see broader college possibilities.

Since he arrived at the College Board in October, Mr. Coleman has been working on a fundamental redesign of the SAT, which he announced in February. The test, he said, should focus on “things that matter more so that the endless hours students put into practicing for the SAT will be work that’s worth doing.”

Citing the College Board’s [Advanced Placement tests](#) as a model, he said he aims to have a test that requires students to demonstrate the skills that good classroom teachers drill them on to reach academic excellence.

Deciding what students should master has been Mr. Coleman's métier: he was an architect of the [Common Core](#) standards — guidelines for what students should learn in each grade — that are being put into place in most states. So it is no surprise that he has clear views on what the SAT should test, although he declines to offer specifics because College Board members need to be consulted on every element of the redesign. Most likely, he said, the outlines — sections on critical reading and math and a 25-minute essay — will remain the same. But Mr. Coleman has made known his discomfort with the essay, which puts no premium on accuracy. Students can get top marks for declaring that the Declaration of Independence was written by Justin Bieber and sparked the French Revolution, as long as the essay is well organized and develops a point of view.

"We should not be encouraging students to make up the facts," Mr. Coleman said. "We should be asking them to construct an argument supported by their best evidence."

Over and over, Mr. Coleman returns to the need to prod students into marshaling their evidence. "The heart of the revised SAT will be analyzing evidence," he said. "The College Board is reaching out to teachers and college faculty to help us design questions that, for example, could ask students to use math to analyze the data in an economics study or the results of a scientific experiment, or analyze the evidence provided within texts in literature, history, geography or natural science."

The last overhaul of the SAT was not so long ago. In 2005, spurred by the threat that the University of California system might no longer consider its test for admission, the College Board introduced with fanfare the "New SAT," dropping quantitative comparisons and the "warm is to cool as top is to ____" analogies and adding more advanced math, in the process making the test more like the ACT.

Competition between the two tests has not let up: for the first time last year, the ACT surpassed the SAT in market share. With the new redesign, the SAT seems likely to inch even closer in content to the ACT, which focuses more on grammar, usage and mechanics than on vocabulary.

Robert Schaeffer, public education director of [FairTest](#), is dismissive of redesigns past and present.

"Through all these changes, neither the SAT nor ACT has gotten better in terms of two things that matter," he said. "One is predicting accurately how well a student will do in college. They've still got the same weak-to-moderate predictive power — less than a student's high school grades. And there's still a problem with equity. The tests still underpredict for females and overpredict for males, and they don't do well for low-income students."

Mr. Coleman talks, intensely, of “moving from delivering assessment to delivering opportunity” to low-income students who do not invest enough in the college-admission process.

“Kids need to have a level of ambition,” he said, “because what we find is that absent the intensity of a peer group committed to getting into college, kids just fall away, even a lot of the ones who do very well on the test, and could go to top colleges.”

Struck by recent research on how few high-achieving low-income students apply to top colleges — but how many more do so if given information about their options — he said that the College Board must help ensure that these students get information about colleges they could aspire to and financial aid that would pay for it.

“We will consider students who take the assessment as within our care, and that means that sending out a score report isn’t the end of it,” he said.

If the SAT is a product of the East Coast elite, so is Mr. Coleman, a Yale graduate, Rhodes scholar, former McKinsey consultant and son of the outgoing president of Bennington College.

And like his test, Jon L. Erickson, president of ACT Inc.’s education division, is a low-key Midwesterner. He grew up in Wisconsin, taught high school, was an academic affairs specialist at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and has been at ACT, which is based in Iowa, for 30 years.

This organization, too, is preparing for major change. Starting in 2015, the ACT will be available on a computer as well as, for the time being, on paper. Those who take the test on a computer will see a new breed of questions — free-response questions in which students manipulate on-screen images to form their conclusions. In one sample question, students move a plunger on a cylindrical gas tank to change gas pressure and temperature. They then write a few sentences describing the relationship between distance and pressure and between temperature and pressure, and graph those relationships.

In another question, students “pour” four different liquids into beakers to see which one rises to the top and which one sinks to the bottom. Based on their experimentation, they predict what would happen if all four liquids were combined.

“Those kinds of questions are more expensive to produce, but I think students will be more engaged by them,” said Mr. Erickson, whose predecessor, Cynthia B. Schmeiser, defected to the College Board in April.

Many details of digitization remain to be resolved. About a third of schools don't have the capacity to accommodate all their students in a computer lab or other lockdown setting, Mr. Erickson said. Will it be entire schools or individual students who opt for a paper-and-pencil test? Which questions will be graded by computer, and which by humans? And because the two versions need to be comparable, just how many beyond-the-bubble questions will be added to the mix?

One decision that has been made: content will be unchanged.

"Our approach will still be based on what students learn in the classroom," Mr. Erickson said. "Where we're pushing the envelope is to be more relevant, timely and actionable."

Indeed, ACT wants to reach ever younger — into elementary school. Next year, it will start rolling out a series of computer-based tests that track student learning over time as well as progress in the current school year, and measure how far above or below grade level a student is in core subjects. Alabama, for one, has signed on to use the tests as its end-of-year assessment for Grades 3 to 8. In the program, parents and teachers will get increasingly detailed reports outlining the skills needed to be ready for college.

"Like a lot of people, I do sometimes worry about how many tests children have to take these days," Mr. Erickson said. "But we're not just trying to add more tests. We're trying to give students and teachers more information that can help them."

"The spine of everything we do is college readiness," he said. "Now our agenda of college readiness has become the national agenda."