

SATs skewed by shady 'disability'

■ **Education:** An analysis finds that rich, white youths are working the system to get extra time on the critical exam.

By KENNETH WEISS
Los Angeles Times

The number of students who get extra time to complete the SAT because of a claimed learning disability has soared by more than 50 percent in recent years, with the bulk of the growth coming from exclusive private schools and public schools in mostly wealthy, white suburbs.

The predominance of rich, white teenage boys among those claiming disabilities troubles members of the College Board, which owns the examination. Their fear is that the accommodations, rather than help those with real disabilities, increasingly become a way of gaming the system — allowing privileged families to gain advantage on a high-stakes exam.

"We are concerned about people taking advantage of it who are not really qualified to, but have been smart enough to step around the rules," College Board President Gaston Caperton said. "And, secondly, that people who are not as (economically) advantaged have equal access to accommodations."

Demands for special accommodations — which schools usually approve based on a psychologist's recommendation or sometimes a doctor's note — are similarly on the increase on other high-stakes tests, such as those that involve admission to law or medical schools.

A Los Angeles Times analysis of data

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supplied by the College Board shows that those taking advantage of special accommodations on the SAT — usually extra time — are disproportionately clustered in well-to-do pockets along the Boston-New York-Washington corridor.

More recently, the practice has spread west to similar wealthy, highly competitive communities in the Los Angeles area as well as in the San Francisco Bay area, Santa Barbara and San Diego.

Last year, 47,000 SATs were given with special accommodations. The vast majority are not controversial. They involved students with well-documented learning disabilities. For example, a dyslexic teenager may get time and a half, or ¾ hours, to plow through the three-hour test because he or she reads so slowly.

But a growing number of cases — hundreds and perhaps thousands — involved what one college official calls "upper-income game players" who believe that extra time can provide a crucial boost in their scores.

"It is a way for rich white kids to create a minority niche for themselves," said Paul Kanarek, who runs SAT preparation classes in Southern California. "I don't see many kids from Compton getting these kinds of luxurious diagnoses."

Indeed, although only a tiny fraction — 1.9 percent — of students nationwide got special accommodations for the SAT, the percentage jumps fivefold for students at New England prep schools. At 20 prominent northeastern private schools, nearly one in 10 students received special treatment.

The percentage was nearly as high at a select group of private high schools in Southern California, such as Crossroads School in Santa Monica and Cate School near Santa Barbara. Public schools in some rich communities, such as Beverly Hills High and Torrey Pines High in the San Diego community of La Jolla, also had percentages well above average.

In sharp contrast, an analysis of 10 inner-city high schools in the Los Angeles region found that not a single one of 1,439 students who took the SAT got extra time or other accommodations.

"Something is out of whack," said Perry Zirkel, a professor of education law at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania. Disabilities generally increase with poverty, he said, not with wealth. At the inner-city schools, 80 percent of the students were black or Latino, and two-thirds reported a family income of less than \$30,000 a year.

What does tend to increase with money is the ability of parents to be advocates for their children.

Well-off neighborhoods are also more permeated by the frenzy surrounding the SAT, the dreaded test that has taken on outsized importance as a stepping stone — or stumbling block — to the best colleges and thus, as the thinking goes, a life of prestige and prosperity.

The urgency often hits parents when a child has gotten a 3.8 grade-point average throughout high school and then comes home with what the family considers mediocre SAT scores. "Kids get lulled by grade inflation and then get smacked by reality with the SAT," said Bruce Poch, admissions director at Pomona College in Southern California.

High school officials say parents then sometimes shop around among psychologists until they find one willing to write up a desired diagnosis. After that, they return to school to press their demands,

occasionally with a disability advocate in tow to threaten legal action under antidiscrimination laws.

"When a parent walks in with a diagnosis from a physician saying 'they've got this and this,' it's a very difficult thing not to make accommodations," said Jeffrey Davis, former principal of Coronado High School in a pricey beachfront San Diego community.

"Even when schools are feeling confident" that the accommodation is unwarranted, "unless they are 100 percent sure, they don't want to risk any kind of litigation," he said.

If a high school accepts the diagnosis, the Educational Testing Service, which administers the SAT for the College Board, routinely allows an accommodation. Special treatment can be anything from extra time (the most common) to a Braille version for students who cannot see or help in filling in the bubbles on the computer cards for a student who broke his arms in a car accident.

Disability laws are quite complex, and high school officials often feel ill-equipped to turn away pushy parents and make tough decisions that could potentially infringe on the rights of a disabled child.

"I'm not here to interpret the law," said Vivian Saatjian Green, director of counseling at Beverly Hills High. "You hear about these courts cases where the teacher denied someone's rights and got in trouble."

Disability rights activists, used to battling unresponsive bureaucracies for needed help, are loath to question the legitimacy of any disability claim or request for accommodations.

Concern about abuses "is very exaggerated," said Josh Konecky, staff attorney with Disability Rights Advocates in Oakland, Calif.

Others, however, say their experience indicates that cheating is clearly a reality.

"Ethically, it feels very wrong to me," said Sheryl Burnam, a guidance counselor at Calabasas High School in Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley. "There are too many kids who truly need (extra time). You stick them in a room with kids who have nothing wrong with them, except they want to go to Berkeley."

Jane McClure, a psychologist, tests and counsels learning-disabled students in San Francisco. She now collects fees up front because some parents refuse to pay if her diagnosis doesn't show their child has a disability. Parents tell her, she says, "I don't think he has a learning disability. I just want him to have every advantage possible."

One West Los Angeles mother, a psychologist, succeeded in getting her daughter extra time.

"My daughter took the SAT the first time and came back and kept saying, 'If I just had a little bit more time, I know I could have done well.'"

Her daughter was making good grades at a private high school but showed disappointing results on the PSAT, the precursor to the SAT. So she took her to a psychologist, who concluded she "might have attention deficit disorder."

The principal didn't think the diagnosis warranted special accommodations in school. After the 17-year-old got disappointing scores on the SAT, the mother sent an appeal directly to the College Board asking for extended time when the child took the test again. The request was denied.

Knowing she had to move fast, she took

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national panel five years ago to review requests for extended time from students who have no history of disabilities or testing accommodations in school.

The panel of psychologists and other experts denied 82 percent of the 670 appeals last year, either for insufficient documentation or inappropriate diagnoses. With such a high rejection rate, the number of appeals to the College Board panel has begun to drop from its peak of 850. Instead, parents simply apply pressure directly to high schools, concluding, correctly, that school officials are more likely to cave in to parental pressure.

"That is where the loophole still is," said McClure, the educational psychologist in San Francisco, who also sits on the College Board panel. "If the kids get the psychological testing done and the school accepts it, then they do not have to go through us."

The private company that offers the ACT, a popular alternative to the SAT, has been countering the demand for accommodations by insisting on documentation for any disability diagnosed within a year of taking the test — even if the high school has signed off on the diagnosis. Since the new policy was adopted, requests for accommodations have begun dropping.

But the ACT is primarily taken in the Midwest, where competition to get into top colleges and universities is less ferocious than on either coast.

Beth Robinson, the College Board official who runs the group's review board, says there is no plan to adopt a similar policy for the SAT.

"It would raise holy hell," she said.

Can extra time significantly boost SAT scores? Research indicates that it does — often by 100 points, a substantial gain that could make the difference between acceptance or rejection at many selective college and universities.

Wayne Camera, the College Board's research director, cautions that the gains for some students could be as small as 25 points. But Kanarek, who runs Princeton Review SAT prep courses, says the matter is simple:

"If you give me a smart kid and 10 extra minutes a section, that's 100 extra points," he said. "You can get to math questions you wouldn't normally get to. But primarily it's the critical reading section. If I give you unlimited time to solve a critical reading problem, you'll ultimately get there."

In fact, 20 percent to 25 percent of non-disabled students never complete all the questions on the SAT, which is in two parts, one of which measures verbal ability and the other, math. Only 730 of the 1.3 million college-bound high school seniors who took the test last year received a perfect score of 1600.

Research has found that the SAT is generally a very good predictor of how well a student will do in college, which is why colleges use SAT scores in admissions. But an Education Testing Service study of students who received special accommodations suggested that the extra help may undermine that predictive ability.

ETS researchers have determined that for students with physical handicaps, tests given with special accommodations are just as reliable as regular SATs. That is, they do just as well in predicting a person's success in college.

But for learning-disabled students who received extended time on the test, SAT scores tended to overstate their college

performance, according to an ETS study. In other words, their grades in college didn't measure up to their relatively high SAT scores.

The study had a major flaw: It did not consider whether the students continued to receive special treatment — such as extra time on tests — in their freshman classes. Camera is now conducting further research to resolve that issue.

The driving reason for further research is pressure from the U.S. Education Department and disability rights groups for the College Board to drop an asterisk that is currently placed next to the scores of students who take the test under nonstandard conditions.

College admissions officers, when they get the scores, don't know details of why the score is "flagged" with the asterisk. But federal officials and disability rights groups assert in a lawsuit that the asterisk stigmatizes students, subjects them to possible discrimination by college admissions officers and may violate the Americans with Disabilities Act.

SAT administrators question whether that is so. Their own research indicates that only 52 percent of college admissions officers even notice the asterisk, and those who do notice said it has no impact or could help the student.

But disability rights activists and ETS researchers say that if the asterisk disappears, more students are likely to seek extra time.

The activists contend that the asterisk scares off disabled students who would otherwise seek accommodations.

Ellen Mandinach, an ETS researcher who has spent a year talking to educators, students and parents, says removing the asterisk "will open the floodgates to a lot of people who have suspect credentials. We are going to be inundated."

For now, requests for accommodations are concentrated in wealthy areas such as Greenwich, Conn., where 30 percent of schoolchildren have been diagnosed with learning disabilities, getting extra tutoring and other special help. Connecticut has the highest rate of students getting extra time on the test: 5 percent.

Students who get such accommodations on the SAT are twice as likely to come from families that earn \$100,000 or more. They are much more likely to be male. Compared with regular test takers, they are also far more likely to have parents with either a college or graduate degree. They are considerably more likely than other test takers to be white and attend private schools or public ones in wealthy suburbs.

SAT critics say the unequal access to special accommodations eventually will erode the purpose of a standardized test: a common measure that can fairly compare students from the best and worst of schools.

Mark Sklarow, executive director of the Independent Educational Consultants Association, said the private counselors who are his members complain about parents willing to lie on college applications about ethnicity or income, or fudge a disability — whatever they believe will boost their child's prospects.

"Parents are looking for any advantage, no matter how small," he said. "Instead of teaching your kids that they live or die on their own merits, it's 'How can we work the system?' It would seem to be the last lesson you would want to teach your children before they set off on the world."

her daughter to an "M.D. psychiatrist ... who wrote a quick letter, saying she thought maybe (the teen-ager) had ADD and was in the process of a diagnosis. M.D. letters have a lot of weight. This time they allowed it."

Did it help? With extra time and tips from a SAT tutor, the girl's score went up 250 points — enough to be wait-listed at the University of California, Berkeley.

"I wasn't 100 percent sure that she needed extra time," the mother said. "It ended up working to my benefit, and she obviously did well."

It is possible, psychologists say, for subtle disabilities in hard-working students to remain masked until late in life, sometimes not surfacing until graduate school.

Smart students with disabilities learn tricks to compensate in high school, especially since classroom tests rarely require them to focus longer than 50 minutes in one stretch. It's only when they come up against a three-hour, high-stakes test such as the SAT that the disability becomes evident.

But there are also many cases in which parents hear about a neighbor's child getting extended time and make rather bald-faced efforts to join the rush.

Greg Missigian, head of special education at James Monroe High School in Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley, gets frustrated when parents call asking for their child to be tested for a disability, obviously angling for extra time on the SAT for a 17-year-old who is doing well in a hefty load of rigorous Advanced Placement and honors classes.

"We are normally dealing with kids functioning at the fourth-grade level," said Missigian, who juggles the needs of 400 special education students. "Why in the world are we testing this kid when we have so many more who are legitimate?"

Typically, the savvy parents will ask him about a "504 plan — what can I do and how can I do it?"

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 has emerged as the legal vehicle of choice for those working the system. To demonstrate a disability under this law, a student must show a health impairment, defined as "limited strength, vitality or alertness."

Attention deficit disorder, which slips neatly into the Section 504 category, has become a hot diagnosis. That angers some specialists. "Just because a kid isn't paying attention doesn't mean it's ADD," said Dr. David Velkoff, medical director of the Drake Institute of Behavioral Medicine in West Los Angeles. "It's misdiagnosed; it's become a wastebasket term."

In an attempt to relieve pressure on school officials, the College Board set up a