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SAT Scores Touch Off a New Spring Fever

- Many rise early to get results. But this year, the added essay creates uncertainty.

By Stuart Silverstein and Joel Rubin, Times Staff Writers

As a new era of SAT scores dawned Monday, Carole Wampole was eager to learn her son's results on the recently revised college entrance exam.

The Newport Coast businesswoman checked the website of the College Board, the owner of the SAT, through the night in hopes of getting an early peek at the scores. She succeeded shortly after 5 a.m. — the time the College Board had announced it would post results — but Wampole had few regrets about losing a night's sleep.

In recent days, she said, "All of his friends were calling him, saying: 'Don't forget that they're out in the morning, they're out in the morning.' They're all abuzz with all of this stuff. And I wanted to be able to buffer any pain that there might be."

Fortunately for Wampole's son, Spencer, the experience was painless: He earned an overall 2150 on the SAT's new scoring scale of 600 to 2400. "I'm not going to take the test again. I'm very happy," said the junior at Tarbut V'Torah school in Irvine who hopes to attend USC.

Monday marked the first release of scores from the revised and expanded SAT, the well-known exam used by most colleges and universities to help determine admissions.

The test now has three parts, including a writing section with an essay. The changes, announced in 2002, were intended to improve the quality of the test and to link it more closely to high school instruction.

The changes were propelled in large part by the University of California, the SAT's biggest customer, which had threatened to drop the test as an admissions requirement.

Former UC President Richard C. Atkinson had criticized the SAT as testing ill-defined notions of college aptitude and said it was unfair.

But for many students, parents and college counselors, the new scores produced anxiety and confusion.

"These poor juniors have been coming in with this number and they don't know what to do with it and neither do we," said Sharon Merrow Cuseo, dean of the upper school at Harvard-Westlake School in Studio City. "What does a '2000' mean? That doesn't even sound like an SAT score that we are used to."

Much of the tumult over the new scoring format came as a result of the switch from the prior scale, which dated to the 1920s. It ranged from 400 to a so-called perfect score of 1600, for students who earned 800 on both the verbal and math sections.

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The new so-called perfect score, 2400, was attained by 107 students around the country, including 24 in California, the College Board said. That was well above the number expected; a College Board official had predicted last week that it would take a full year — including seven SAT testing sessions — to produce 100 or so perfect scores.

Kevin Shin, a 16-year-old junior at Whitney High School in Cerritos, came close. He said his mother woke him up at 5:30 a.m. Monday to check his SAT results. She was happy with his 2340. He was more ambivalent, especially since he took a test prep course.

"I'd like to say I was happy about it, but I don't know if it shows any intelligence," he said. "I feel like I purchased the score."

Nevertheless, with his strong score, Shin said he can now aim "a little higher" and look at universities he wouldn't have considered with the 1490 he scored on the SAT in January.

In recent years, amid a boom in the number of students reaching college age, competition for admission to top-caliber institutions has been intensifying and the outcomes have become increasingly unpredictable.

The new version of the SAT has added to the stress surrounding college admissions, and that was apparent Monday as high school juniors and parents booted up their computers to get their scores. By 2 p.m., test scores had been downloaded for 185,000 students, more than 60% of those who took the March 12 exam. In addition, an undetermined number of other students received their scores by phone. Students waiting for the results to arrive by mail later this month were in the minority.

"I had to check, I was too anxious. Couldn't wait," said Mark Finster, 17, who checked his scores on a classroom computer a few minutes before the 9 a.m. bell signaled the beginning of his second-period class. Finster, a junior at Corona del Mar High School in Newport Beach, said he was disappointed with his 1580 score and planned to take the exam a second time, and perhaps a third. Remy Greeno, a 16-year-old junior at Harvard-Westlake who woke up at 5 a.m., said she was worried that the College Board website might crash from heavy traffic later in the morning. After shielding her eyes from the glare of the computer screen that illuminated her dark bedroom, Greeno pumped her fist in the air as she added up her score of 2230, turned off the computer and went back to bed for another hour.

Yet other students, such as Angela Obispo, a junior at John Marshall High School in Los Feliz, were dreading the results. Obispo said she was overwhelmed by the scoring scale, but looked up her results at 6 a.m. after being prodded to check by her father.

When she saw her results — which she would only say were between 1300 and 1600, Obispo wasn't feeling any better. "I was kind of depressed," she said. "A lot of students were really bummed out."

Some students said they were in no great hurry to check for their scores. After his parents spent "big bucks" to send him through a test-preparation course, Corona del Mar junior Scott Sanford, 17, said: "I'm afraid to look. Colleges place so much emphasis on the scores."

Sanford's classmate, Matt Jones, said he, too, was reluctant to look, but was resigned to the fact that he would have to check before returning home from school Monday afternoon. "I can just see my mom standing in the doorway when I get home asking me what I scored," he said, shaking his head.

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Still other juniors decided to delay taking the SAT until upcoming dates in May and June. The number of students who registered for the March test was down about 11% from a year earlier.

Some said they wanted more time to prepare, while others had missed registration deadlines. Max Ukropina, 17, a Corona del Mar student, said he was concerned with the unveiling of the new test format. "If there are problems with the new test, I didn't want to be one of the guinea pigs," he said. "I figured I'd let them work out all the wrinkles and take it next time."

As for how to judge those new scores — or find the rough equivalencies with the old, 1600-based scores — some college counselors say the basic rule of thumb is to shave one-third off the new total scores.

In other words, scoring 2100 on the new SAT would be equivalent to 1400 on the old one — a level likely to give most students strong odds of getting into all but the most competitive colleges.

Still, several factors will make translating scores between the old format and the new tricky. For one thing, the College Board isn't yet telling students how their writing scores ranked among all SAT takers or even providing an average.

A preliminary version of the familiar percentile rankings that help guide students will come out late this year, but official percentile rankings aren't expected until October 2006.

Colleges, meanwhile, are evaluating how they will use the results from the new writing section, which includes the essay.

David Benjamin Gruenbaum, owner of a test-preparation company in Irvine, said the anxiety of the writing section was overblown.

By midafternoon, he had spoken to about half a dozen of his students and said that based on that sampling, the writing section — or at least its scoring — may not have been tough enough.

He said his students, even those not especially gifted in verbal skills, were scoring higher than expected on the writing section, which includes a handwritten essay and grammar questions.

"It's really making me think the writing test is too easy," he said.

Times staff writers Rebecca Trounson and Erica Williams contributed to this report.

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