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Abuses seen in requests for untimed SAT tests

'Disabled' exemption can help boost score

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The soaring number of high school students taking the SAT without time limits after being declared "learning disabled" has educators suspicious that some students are claiming disabilities as a scheme to get a better score.

Taking an untimed Scholastic Assessment Test was almost unheard of a decade ago. But this year, about 16,000 college-bound high school students will use that option, more than double the number five years ago. The number of students taking the test has remained unchanged, at about one million.

With most students facing the challenge of getting the maximum number of right answers in a short period of time, and with scores critical to admission to the best schools, untimed test takers can have a large advantage.

The advantage is so obvious, say some educators, that some parents eagerly look for psychologists willing to designate their child as learning disabled. Sometimes, guidance counselors say, parents have even cited anxiety surrounding the SAT as a disability and sought an exemption for it.

Most of the requests for untimed tests are legitimate, educators say. They say what is suspicious is the growing number of students who take the test untimed, even though they aren't in special educa-

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Abuses are seen in requests for tests

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tion classes and have never before claimed a disability.

"It's people looking for shortcuts rather than people with a genuine need," said Linda Shapiro, director of guidance at Newton North High School. "People are very tense and they're looking for anything that will give their kids an edge."

Educators say the increase in untimed tests reflects two disturbing trends: the misuse of special education labels, and the mythic importance placed on the SAT by parents worried about getting their children into the "right" college.

But schools and the College Board are so worried about violating laws protecting the disabled they are reluctant to challenge students who claim the exemption.

"It's been really hard to stem the tide of people wanting untimed testing," said one west suburban special education director who, like many of those interviewed, asked to remain unidentified. "If you have the money, you can go to any hospital in Boston and find a disability."

The SAT, required by all but about 200 colleges nationwide, consists of seven sections, each 15-30 minutes long. The time limit is deliberately made part of the challenge.

The College Board releases the untimed students' scores to colleges with a note indicating "nonstandard test conditions." But some colleges, newly sensitive to the Americans With Disabilities Act, say they do not look at the designation.

"We make a very big point in training new admissions people that we treat these students exactly the same way we would any other," said Connie Sheehy, associate director of admissions at Williams College. "There's nothing in our database to even flag them."

Letter of proof required

Students do not have to be in special education classes to get an untimed test. The College Board requires only a letter of proof from a state-li-

censed psychologist, psychiatrist or school special needs evaluator.

What schools worry about is the increasing ease with which students get those letters. And, since the old stigma surrounding the learning disability label has started to fade, more parents are willing to seek it, educators say.

Learning disabilities include problems such as attention deficit disorder, dyslexia, even emotional problems.

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WEST SUBURBAN PHYSICIAN

Some school guidance counselors at schools in some of the wealthier Boston suburbs say a parent willing to spend enough money can usually find someone willing to call their child learning disabled.

"There's a guy who, for a price, will give you a diagnosis," Shapiro said.

Like expensive test preparation courses, the misuse of untimed tests most often occurs with students who have money or parents willing to fight for it.

About 20 percent of the college applicants who take the The Princeton Review SAT prep course in Newton also try to take the test untimed, said executive director Reed Talada.

"These are parents in wealthy communities who are trying to give their student every edge," said Maureen Welsh, director of School Services for the College Board, administrators of the SAT.

Schools are legally required to test children for special needs as soon as a parent requests it. If the school finds no special need after testing, a

parent can ask for a hearing. Lawyers for the hearing can cost the school tens of thousands of dollars - and if the school loses, it must pay the parents' legal fees as well. Facing this, schools will often back down.

Counselors show concern

Guidance counselors say some parents think untimed testing will make their child look better; their good school grades will seem even more exceptional from a student with a learning disability, they reason.

"We've had kids do this in hopes that the Ivy League will open up to them," said Hugh Chandler, head of guidance at Weston High School. "There's a perception that this test will change everything."

At Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, special education director Jane MODOONO said she has seen more students taking the test untimed. But those students are not all requesting special needs education once they reach college, she said.

Though those claiming a learning disability are only 1.6 percent of the total test takers, concern about untimed tests consumed much of the discussion at a local meeting of college admissions counselors last spring.

"They had an overflow room of guidance counselors and college admissions officials, and everybody in that room was telling stories like that," said Robert Schaeffer, public education director for Fair Test, a Cambridge-based organization fighting for more equitable standardized tests. "They're concerned about how to figure out: Are kids genuinely in need of the extra time?"

But College Board officials, guidance counselors, and college admissions officers worry that any attempt to control untimed testing could hurt the students who genuinely need it.

"There's a percentage of error in anything you do," said Buck Weaver, who tests children with special needs at his clinic in Weston. "That's the cost you pay for not discriminating against the kids who genuinely have disabilities."