

College Board flunks math, gets 4,411 SAT scores wrong

Our view:

Marking foul-up highlights the strains on a fast-growing testing industry.

Jake DeLillo recalls a rainy Saturday last October when he took the all-important SAT college admissions test at Yorktown High School in Yorktown Heights, N.Y. As captain of the lacrosse team there, DeLillo, 17, had been recruited by several colleges. Then his SAT scores came in lower than expected, and his options appeared to shrivel. DeLillo picked a college only to discover later that his SAT had been scored incorrectly — 170 points shy of the accurate score.

Jake was one of 4,411 students who took the SAT on Oct. 8 whose tests were incorrectly scored. The foul-up raises troubling questions about quality control and candor at the College Board, which administers the exam, and about whether the test-processing industry as a whole has kept up with the surge of standardized tests being given to secondary school students.

So how did this happen, and could it happen again?

The College Board, based in New York, blames the weather. It says heavy rain on test day in the Northeast caused the test forms to swell, which threw off a mechanical scoring machine. And, although changes are being made, it could happen again, not just with the SAT but with a myriad of other tests high school students now take.

The College Board's gaffe prompted a chorus of critics to call for reduced testing. That misses the point. For decades, the problem with K-12 schools has been the lack of accountability. For better or worse, correcting that problem requires exams. It is the only way for colleges to compare knowledge levels of applicants from differing schools and backgrounds.

The key issue is how the non-profit College Board, which handled 12 million tests last year while taking in \$485 million in revenue, performed in the crisis.

The gold standard for corporate crisis management dates back more than 20 years to Johnson & Johnson's prompt and full disclosures while dealing with the poisoning of bottles of Tylenol. At the opposite pole lies Guidant Corp., which belatedly reported problems last year with two of its implantable pacemakers. The College Board's response falls somewhere in between. Its shortcomings include:

► Dribbling out the bad news. The College Board issued three disclosures in two weeks, each conceding a larger problem. What started out as a situation involving 400 students with a maximum error of 400 points became one involving 4,441 students with a maximum error of 450 points. In every revelation, minimizing the problem appeared to be the board officials' priority.

► Inadequate safeguards. The College Board should have discovered the problem itself. Instead, student complaints exposed it. Given the stakes — college acceptances and financial aid can ride on the scores — the College Board should have made sure its scoring subcontractor, Pearson Educational Measurement based in Iowa, knew how to handle moist test forms.

The College Board promises increased scrutiny for future exams, including the next one on May 6. That's a hopeful sign, but not enough to restore the credibility of the College Board or the rest of the testing industry.

Just weeks before the SAT problems surfaced, an education think tank in Washington, D.C., Education Sector, released a little noticed report about a testing industry under stress. The surge in exams has strained the handful of companies that make up the industry, raising the risk of mistakes, the authors presciently predicted.

The recommendations in that report, which range from a national testing oversight board to larger federal investments in testing technology, warrant a fresh look.

Taking the SATs is stressful enough without students having to pray for a sunny day.

