

# Class in the Guise of Merit\*

Allan Nairn and others

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*Ranking students by SAT scores is the same as ranking them by family income, not by merit or accomplishment.*

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Many individuals who run powerful institutions, and many academics who write about them, contend that American society used to be something of an aristocracy where wealth and privilege ruled and the future of individuals was shaped largely by their economic background. This system, they argue, has been replaced by selection according to merit. Economic class is said to have given way to, in Henry Chauncey's words, "the democracy of multiple-choice tests."<sup>1</sup>

ETS President William W. Turnbull sums up this view:

The ability to perform well on tasks sampled by examinations, along with other common indices of accomplishments, has come largely to replace considerations of family or wealth or religion or ethnicity as a basis for acceptance into selective colleges and professional schools.<sup>2</sup>

The implication by test professionals that standardized aptitude testing replaced ranking based on class with ranking based on merit is misleading. A ranking of people by SAT scores remains by and large a ranking of people by family income. The pattern is consistent over time, geographic region, and fine gradations of income. It is not simply a matter of penthouse versus tenement. The more money a person's family makes, the higher that person tends to score. People from homes with \$21,000 incomes tend to score higher than people from homes with \$18,000 incomes; people from white collar homes tend to score higher than people from blue collar homes. A College Board statistical report on 647,031 students who took the 1973-74 SAT illustrates this point (see Figure 1).

The ranking by class prevails not just when large groups are averaged together; it also prevails

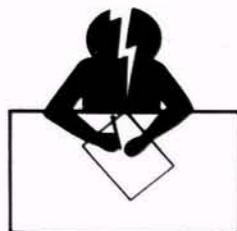


Figure 1. Report on 647,031 Students Taking SAT in 1973-74

SAT Average	Parents' Mean Income†
750-800	\$24,124
700-749	21,980
650-699	21,292
600-649	20,330
550-599	19,481
500-549	18,824
450-499	18,122
400-449	17,387
350-399	16,182
300-349	14,355
250-299	11,428
200-249	8,639

(Source: *College Bound Seniors, 1973-74*, Admissions Testing Program of the College Entrance Examination Board, Table 21, p. 27.)

† Students estimated parents' income on the ETS "Student Descriptive Questionnaire."

<sup>1</sup> ETS Annual Report 1960-61, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> William W. Turnbull, "On Educational Standards, Testing, and the Aspirations of Minorities," speech made at the Conference on Academic Standards and Their Relationship to Minority Admissions, conducted by the American-Jewish Congress at the Kellogg Center of the School of International Affairs at Columbia University, December 8, 1974, p. 11.

\* Excerpted from: Allan Nairn and associates, *The Reign of ETS: The Corporation That Makes up Minds* (Washington, D.C.: Ralph Nader Report, 1980), Summary report, Chapter 5, pp. 25-30.

among applicants from individual institutions. Less detailed data on the scores and incomes of 1977-78 test-takers indicate that the ranking still holds firm.<sup>3</sup>

A 1973 study by ETS researchers Franklin Evans and Donald Rock analyzed the scores and backgrounds of incoming students at eight law schools. They found that students of "high" socioeconomic status had a mean LSAT score about 40 points higher than those of "average" background who in turn ranked higher than the "low" status students by about 30 points.

### Past Accomplishments: Best Predictor

The assertion that the ETS test system ranks people by individual merit does not stand up to the hard facts of student performance. Alexander Astin in his massive study of 36,581 students found that, unlike the SAT scores, first-year grades did *not* correlate with parental income.<sup>4</sup> A 1969 ETS study of 15,535 college-bound students found that actual accomplishments outside the classroom did not correlate with income either: "Although educational ambitions were significantly related to accomplishments in several areas, family income was not. *That is, students from families with different incomes did not significantly differ in the number or level of accomplishments they reported*" (emphasis added).<sup>5</sup>

"This lack of a relationship between accomplishments and family background," wrote ETS researcher Leonard L. Baird in a 1979 summary of research in the field, "is supported by the National Merit studies which reported no significant correlation between these two types of variables in their samples. These results suggest that the accomplishment measures do not discriminate against disadvantaged students, although disadvantaged students do score lower on academic ability tests [that is, ETS aptitude tests]."<sup>6</sup>

Baird also found that these measures were actually better predictors of college and graduate school success than the tests. "Since the consensus of the

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studies indicates that information about past accomplishments is the best predictor of later accomplishments," he wrote. "... admission committees who wish to select students with the greatest potential for future accomplishment should look for evidence of students' past accomplishments."

In sum, although it is advertised as a test of "scholastic aptitude," and although it is used by colleges to accept and reject applicants ostensibly on the basis of merit, for many students the SAT may be more a reflection of their social class than of their potential for accomplishment inside or beyond the classroom.

### Scores and Social Class

Although testing pioneers such as Terman and Carl C. Brigham (the father of the SAT) stressed the connection between scores and social class (and used that connection to claim that the tests revealed that those social groups which scored low were intellectually inferior), ETS today carefully avoids mention of the relationship in the literature it sends to test-takers. ETS now claims that the tests measure the potential of *individuals*, apart from their class.

As early as the 1950s, ETS began telling test-takers that the scores reflected their personal merit. In *YOU: Today and Tomorrow*, an ETS text first issued in 1959, ten-year-olds are advised: "So in making their decisions, the first questions that John, Andy, Betsy, and Bill have to ask themselves are these: How much general scholastic ability have I? What special abilities have I?" Such ability, ETS continued, should be measured to help the student decide on "different occupational goals . . . different educa-

<sup>3</sup> National Report, *College Bound Seniors, 1979*, Table 11, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander W. Astin, *Predicting Academic Performance in College* (New York: Free Press, 1971), p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Leonard L. Baird, "Development of an Inventory of Documented Accomplishments for Graduate Admissions," (Princeton, N.J.: ETS, June 1979), p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

tional plans . . . and different school subjects to be chosen. . . ."

Decades of such proclamations from ETS and its testing colleagues have convinced many American students, teachers, and parents that standardized tests accurately measure personal potential. According to one extensive summary of test research, "People generally view all tests as accurate and are quite willing to accept test results as lawful."<sup>7</sup>

The point is painfully clear. A person's scores can and often do become the basis for important changes in self perception and their perceptions of others. One study "found that test scores can contribute to a positive self-concept or can result in emotional disturbance engendered by a sense of failure."<sup>8</sup> Studying 47 Boston high schools, Dennis Dugan found that the student's SAT score "has its greatest impact" on the decision to "enter the labor market . . . instead of pursuing more education."<sup>9</sup> Other studies, such as a 1965 Russell Sage Foundation report, have found that the students who score lowest on tests also have the highest confidence in the validity of their verdicts.<sup>10</sup>

Long since forgotten in the current climate of acceptance of ETS aptitude tests as measures of personal ability were the observations of the Commission on Financing Higher Education, which included the presidents of Brown, Stanford, Johns Hopkins, and two future ETS Trustees, Harvard Provost Paul

H. Buck and Commission Director John D. Millet. In 1952, the Commission wrote, "These tests systematically penalize working class youth, because the problems of the tests are more familiar to middle-class than to working-class experience" (emphasis added).<sup>11</sup>

By continuing to promote a class-determined test, ETS reduces the aspirations and opportunities of millions of working class and poor people—without telling them why. ETS literature explains their condition by their low rank in "aptitude"; college catalogues explain it in terms of merit. But ETS' own statistics are the most telling; they document the ranking by SAT scores, in effect, as a ranking by social class—class in the guise of merit. *ET*

<sup>7</sup> Marjorie C. Kirkland, "The Effects of Tests on Students and Schools," *Review of Educational Research* 41 (October 1971): 308 ff.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 311.

<sup>9</sup> Dennis J. Dugan, "Impact of Parental Educational Investment on Students' Achievement," proceedings of the Social Statistics Section, August 19-22, 1969. Papers presented at annual meeting of the American Statistical Association, New York, 1969, pp. 138-48.

<sup>10</sup> Clarence J. Karier, "Testing for Order and Control in the Corporate Liberal State," *Education Theory* 22 (Spring 1972): 67.

<sup>11</sup> Commission on Financing Higher Education, *Who Should Go To College?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), p. 138.

### Themes of Educational Leadership in 1980-81

We are planning the following theme issues for 1980-81:

Month	Theme	Including	Deadline for Manuscripts
October	Citizenship Education	needs, goals, programs, achievements, global education	July 1, 1980
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December		non-theme	September 1, 1980
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February	Language Learning	reading, composition, language development, dialects, foreign languages, bilingual education, English as a second language	November 1, 1980
March		non-theme	December 1, 1980
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