

College Board alters scholarship test to aid girls' chances

The New York Times

Resolving a complaint that girls lose out to boys unfairly in the awarding of the prestigious National Merit Scholarships, the College Board has agreed to modify its Preliminary Scholastic Assessment Test, the main factor used to award the scholarships.

In the agreement, reached with the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, the College Board said that beginning in 1997 it would add a multiple-choice section that measures writing skills to the PSAT, which is taken by juniors.

Donald Stewart, president of the College Board, said the addition of the writing test is likely to give girls higher scores since girls "tend to do better than boys" on this type of test.

"We're trying to do everything we can to help girls catch up," he said, but "we can't predict the outcomes."

In a complaint filed with the Education Department in 1994, civil-rights advocates said girls tended to score lower on the test even though their high school and college grades were better, and that as a result, about 60 percent of National Merit Scholarships went to boys.

The groups, including the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, or FairTest, and the American Civil Liberties Union Women's Rights Project, wanted the selection process changed to reduce the emphasis on PSAT scores.

Representatives of both groups doubted that adding a section on writing would resolve the problem.

"We're extremely disappointed that the resolution did not go as far as we would like," said Sara Mandelbaum, a staff lawyer for the Women's Rights Project. "We are skeptical that the

THE PSAT

Each year more than a million high school juniors, about 55 percent of them girls, take the Preliminary Scholastic Assessment Test. The top 15,000 scorers, 60 percent of whom are boys, automatically become National Merit semifinalists. These students then submit records of their grades, extracurricular activities, recommendations and an essay. About 14,000 are then chosen as finalists.

About half the finalists receive National Merit Scholarships, which are worth about \$2,000 for a single year, and some can be renewed for subsequent years as an undergraduate.

College Board and the Educational Testing Service can come up with a test that does not discriminate against girls, after decades of having failed to do so."

Robert Schaeffer of FairTest said he was disappointed that the selection method will remain largely intact. "Test scores are not merit," he said, "and this preserves the notion that three hours of filling in bubbles one Saturday morning tells us who our best students are."

FairTest and the ACLU would like to see high school grades and class rank included in the early stages of selection for the scholarships, rather than the final stages.

U.S. grants to help set up non-traditional schools

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Nineteen states, Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia are receiving nearly \$17 million in federal grants to help set up hundreds of public schools that are not bound by conventional rules.

The grants, announced Thursday by the Department of Education, were in the budget for fiscal 1996, which ended Monday, and the amount was a marked increase over the \$6 million spent the previous year. Money earmarked for such alternative institutions, known as charter schools, totals about \$50 million this fiscal year.

Charter schools, set up by groups of parents, teachers, school administrators and others, operate without many of the constraints imposed by local public school districts. A charter outlines what students are expected to learn, but it can be revoked if the school fails to meet its goals.

Since the first charter school opened in Minnesota in 1992, 24 other states and the District of Columbia have passed legislation to allow them. At the end of last year, 269 charter schools were serving 60,000 students. An additional 70 schools were scheduled to open this fall.

In a report released earlier this year, the American Federation of

THE GRANTS

- Alaska, \$647,290
- Arizona, \$1.15 million
- California, \$1.25 million
- Colorado, \$1 million
- Connecticut, \$1 million
- Delaware, \$190,526
- District of Columbia, \$1 million
- Florida, \$1 million
- Georgia, \$800,000
- Illinois, \$788,600
- Kansas, \$850,000
- Louisiana, \$446,250
- Massachusetts, \$1 million
- Michigan, \$772,856
- Minnesota, \$749,730
- New Jersey, \$947,368
- North Carolina, \$1 million
- Oregon, \$500,000
- Puerto Rico, \$323,088
- Texas, \$250,000
- Wisconsin, \$825,000

The conservative Hudson Institute, based in Indianapolis, says charter schools need greater autonomy and should not be bound by union contracts already in place in regular public schools.