The SAT is unfair. My son is studying for it anyway.

It’s hard to quit the college admissions game.

by Amy Frykholm in the December 18, 2019 issue

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When the national scandal over college admissions broke last spring, my son was preparing to take the SAT. Our family avidly read reports of how some wealthy parents had paid proctors to take the SAT for their children and had even manufactured false athletic credentials in an effort to boost their children’s chances of getting into selective colleges. We found these shenanigans entertaining, if unsettling.

As I read these reports, I had to recognize in myself some of the same anxiety that drove these parents to pursue their schemes. My husband and I had just been discussing whether to hire an SAT coach for our son. That’s perfectly legal, of course, and hardly the same as bribing someone. But I had never seen myself playing the college admissions game even to this extent.

Our family’s philosophy of education had never included an emphasis on test scores. We had chosen the place we lived not because it had great schools and a record of

academic achievement but because we wanted to live in a diverse community in the mountains. We loved the grittiness of the town. We loved that our son could spend many of his days tromping through the woods. When friends talked about how their children attended International Baccalaureate schools and took AP classes, we replied by saying something about the “unique experiences” we were creating for our son.

Our hopes for him when it came to college seemed simple: we wanted him to go to school where he would be challenged and where he could learn how big and how interesting the world is.

It was especially irksome to me that the SAT was looming as an important factor in my son’s future. I know that the SAT is far from an objective measure of intellectual aptitude. Studies have demonstrated that SAT scores track closely with parental income: where there is a wealth gap, there is a corresponding achievement gap. (For example, the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, using the College Board’s data, demonstrated this gap in a 2014 study.) SAT scores are in essence markers of accumulated privilege.

The roots of the SAT are even more problematic. The SAT was developed in the early 20th century by an avid eugenicist, Princeton psychology professor Carl Brigham. He devised a test that the military could use in assigning duties to soldiers—and this became more or less the SAT as we know it today.

Brigham believed that white, northern European people are endowed by nature with more intellectual aptitude than others. In his book *A Study of American Intelligence*, Brigham argued that his tests proved that the “Nordic” race was intellectually superior to the “Alpine” (Eastern European), “Mediterranean,” and “Negro” races. He wrote, “The army’s mental tests had proven beyond any scientific doubt that, like the American Negroes, Italians and Jews were genetically ineducable.” It would be a waste of good money even to attempt to try to give them an education, “let alone admit them into our fine medical, law, and engineering graduate schools.”

In *How to Be an Antiracist*, Ibram X. Kendi argues that the development of standardized testing was “one of the most effective racist policies ever devised to degrade Black minds and legally exclude Black bodies.” The tests were used as “scientific” proof of black intellectual inferiority. Schools could point to a number that justified their exclusion of black and brown students and claim that their academic reputations would suffer if they accepted people with lower scores.

For decades, the College Board perpetuated the myth that it objectively measured aptitude, and in 1965 it released a study that claimed to prove it. The board also claimed that because the test was a measure of aptitude, it was impossible for anyone to study for the test. At the same time, however, an industry arose offering to help people do just that. The SAT coaching industry is still on the rise, projected to reach $17.5 billion by 2020. The Princeton Review offers a money-back guarantee to those who take its SAT preparation course—an acknowledgment that something other than sheer aptitude is being measured.

I've exercised social privilege more than once in my son's education.

Kendi talks about the moment when he realized that preparation for a standardized test doesn't make you smarter. "My classmates and I would get higher scores—two hundred points, as promised—than poorer students, who might be equivalent in intellectual strength but did not have the resources or, in some cases, even the awareness to acquire better form through high-priced prep courses."

Despite the wide criticism of the SAT, the test remains for many colleges—including some of the most selective ones—an important part of the admissions application. Some schools have opted out of it: more than 1,000 schools nationwide do not require standardized test scores, and some of them ask for a portfolio of work instead, trusting that their review process is rich enough to provide a good sense of who a student is apart from any SAT numbers. It is encouraging to see this movement grow.

Still, it's hard for students to ignore the SAT completely. If a student leaves an SAT score off his application, regardless of which school he is applying to, it may seem to the admissions office that he is trying to hide a deficiency. So a strategic calculation is called for: Include the score in the application or not? The only way to avoid this dilemma is to have a really good score. And for most people, having a really good SAT score means studying for it.

Education consultant Susan Naimark speaks of the "entitlement gap" in education. I put my entitlement into play more than once during my son's education. When he was young, I requested the best teachers for him—without considering whether that would create a concentration of less-entitled kids in other classrooms. When he had a pretty bad science teacher one year, I encouraged the creation of an alternative classroom—and recognized only later that this meant giving a less-skilled teacher more struggling students. In one sense, I was being an attentive parent. In another

sense, I was giving my son educational tailwinds while creating headwinds for others.

The SAT presented another opportunity to create some tailwind. And so, every Sunday for three hours, my son meets online with an instructor who takes students who have high aspirations—and who have parents with disposable income—through the tedium of learning to think like the SAT.

As my son spends these hours studying and asking me about the difference between *discrete* and *discreet*, I have been thinking about my role in the college admissions game. More and more, as I look around the landscape, I understand that no matter what his SAT score is, my son has plenty of opportunities. There are many colleges and universities that would love to give him a topflight education—schools that have thoughtful, engaged professors and interesting, diverse classmates and that offer the chance to see the big beautiful world. It’s not only that a great education is far more than a test score; it’s that I had bought into a false model of scarcity.

More than probably anyone else on the planet, parents like me need to look around and see the abundance of opportunity in every direction and let go of the score on a racially biased test. But it’s a hard lesson to learn when you are in the middle of college applications and tough to put into practice.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “The SAT and privilege.”