

OUR SAY

Taking Action for *Academic Excellence*

By Paula A. McCall, *NSBE National Pre-College Initiative Chair*

If you are in middle school or high school in the United States now, chances are you have grown up hearing much about “standardized tests.” Getting students to do well on these exams, which include statewide tests as well as national ones such as the SAT and ACT, have been a major focus of education in this country for more than 10 years.

So, how is our country doing in this educational mission? In short: not well. Recently, I read an article in *The Washington Post* titled, “What do SAT, ACT scores really mean?” In this article, which was published last Sept. 25, reporter Valerie Strauss says, “...reading scores on the SAT hit a four-decade low, and writing scores edged down too.... SAT average scores have declined by 20 points since 2006...” She also reports that “ACT scores for the 2012 high school class...were essentially the same as in 2011, meaning no real progress.”

I wondered how African-American students were performing on the tests, so I went to the website of The College Board, the organization that administers the SAT. There, I found that the total average SAT score of African Americans has dropped by 18 points since 2006.

I also found out that, according to College Board estimates, only 43 percent of all students who took the SAT last year are actually ready for college work.

What does this news mean to NSBE? Many colleges and universities place a lot of importance on SAT/ACT scores. In the end, these scores can determine where high school seniors will spend the next four to five years of their lives. Looking at test results like those above, NSBE's Pre-College Initiative team asks,

“What can we do for our students? How do we help them make the scores they need to get into college?”

This year, our answer was simple: “Teach them the SAT/ACT.” We know that some students cannot afford the tutoring or study materials provided by some of the SAT/ACT prep organizations. We also know how important it is to be *prepared* for these exams.

So, we incorporated more SAT/ACT preparation into NSBE's highly popular competition called Try-Math-A-Lon. This preparation included providing books



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and monthly assessments. To track our students' progress and their performance on these exams, we also made it possible for them to submit their SAT/ACT scores to us, just as they would to a college or university.

NSBE Jr. members participating in Try-Math-A-Lon this year have reported being more confident about taking the SAT and ACT than they were the first time they took the tests in June 2012. They have also reported that their scores have risen more than the scores of other students who were also taking the exams for the second time but who

did not participate in Try-Math-A-Lon.

The more exposure students have to the SAT and ACT exams, the better they tend to perform. This is a well-established fact. With NSBE's focus on Academic Excellence this year, we want to support and encourage new ideas such as the revamping of Try-Math-A-Lon.

The Pre-College Initiative team's goal this year is to document a significant positive change in the performance of our students on standardized tests. Who knows? That may even raise the average test scores of students nationwide. ■