The College Board is providing the first details of a newly redesigned SAT that will include major changes to the college-entrance exam, including an emphasis on citing evidence to support answers, coverage of fewer math topics, and a move to an optional essay section.

The plans offer some notable echoes of the Common Core State Standards, which College Board President David Coleman helped write. In a March 5 speech in Austin, Texas, Coleman said the new exam, to debut in the spring of 2016, will be more "focused and useful, more clear and open than ever before"—better reflecting what students learn in high school and what they need to master in college or on the job.

"Admissions officers and counselors find the data from admissions exams useful, but are concerned that these exams have become disconnected from the work of high school classrooms and surrounded by costly test preparation," Coleman said in prepared remarks. "We’ve been listening to students and their families for whom these tests are often mysterious and filled with unproductive anxiety. They are skeptical that either the SAT or ACT allows them to show their best work."

The College Board’s announcement on the redesigned SAT comes two years after the college-entrance exam’s reach was first eclipsed by the rival ACT. For the class of 2013, 1.8 million students took the ACT, compared with 1.7 million taking the SAT.

In addition to content revisions, the new SAT will not penalize students for wrong answers, but only give credit for correct ones—a move aimed at removing some of the strategy from test-taking. Also, the College Board will begin offering the test in some locations on computer, rather than just in a print format.

In May 2012, when it was announced that Coleman would lead the College Board, he said that reshaping the SAT to better reflect the common-core standards would be a top priority.

Asked if the new test would be aligned with the common core, John McGrath, the vice president for communications at the College Board, said in an email: "We are aligning the exam to the evidence that underlines the best of state standards." He then proceeded to cite an example from Texas—one of the four states that have not adopted the common core—as being well aligned with the principles of the redesigned SAT.

The College Board’s announcement of the new SAT comes at a time when the Common Core State Standards for English/language arts and mathematics have drawn increased criticism across states. Indiana, for one, appears on track to void its 2010 adoption of the standards. Meanwhile, lawmakers in many other states, from South Carolina to New York, are considering plans to repeal the standards or delay their implementation.

The news release from the College Board and Coleman’s prepared remarks make no mention of the common core.

Shirley Ort, a vice chair of the board of trustees for the College Board and an associate provost at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, said alignment with the common core was not part of the goal of the new SAT.

"It’s just to make learning relevant to what a student needs to know in the future," she said. In hiring David Coleman, the College Board wanted someone who was "conversant" with the common core, she said, but it didn’t want the organization to become just an expression of the common core.
In any case, as described, the new SAT appears to bear some strong similarities to the Common Core State Standards, which are now being implemented across the nation. (You can find a chart that outlines the planned changes to the SAT, and parallels to the common core, here.)

For instance, the notion of citing specific evidence in a text to support claims is a hallmark of the common-core standards for English/language arts. (Coleman was a lead writer for those standards before joining the College Board.) In addition, the explicit call for students to read and interpret articles in science, history, and social studies on the new SAT echoes the focus of the common core on promoting the teaching of literacy across subjects areas. In fact, the standards include a special section devoted to literacy in science, history/social studies, and technical subjects.

Also, a top priority of the common core in math was to focus on fewer topics in greater depth. The math section on the redesigned SAT, according to the College Board, will draw "from fewer topics that evidence shows most contribute to student readiness for college and career training."

Opportunity and Access

A major theme in Coleman's remarks was the College Board's plans to go beyond the exam itself to expand opportunity for disadvantaged students.

"We cannot stand aside and say, 'We made a fair test. It's not our fault what happens before and after,' " Coleman said. "It may not be our fault, but it is our problem." [In his actual remarks as delivered, Coleman called it a "good" test.]

In an effort to remove the advantage of test prep, often available at a hefty cost, Coleman announced that students will have access to free online SAT-prep materials from the Khan Academy. (Keep an eye on our Digital Education blog for more on this.)

"The SAT has been criticized for being too coachable in the past," said Barbara Gill, a member of the board of trustees of the College Board and assistant vice president of undergraduate admissions at the University Maryland College Park. "This major change will make the content of the SAT more transparent so schools and teachers will have a better idea of what is on the SAT."

Coleman also said the College Board would directly give every income-eligible student who takes the SAT four fee waivers to apply to college. While available upon request in the past, this move to automatically issue waivers is an effort to remove cost barriers to low- and middle-income students, the organization said.

More details about the test specifications will be announced next month.

The redesign effort began over a year ago and involved hundreds of College Board staff members, as well as members of the organization from K-12 and higher education, according to College Board officials. In addition, input was garnered from more than 80 campus meetings held in early 2013.

The rival ACT, which surpassed the SAT's volume of test-takers two years ago, announced last year that it would be unveiling some of the new features of its exam in the spring of 2015, according to Paul Weeks, a vice president for customer engagement at ACT Inc.

The College Board is "revamping," its test, but the Iowa City, Iowa-based ACT characterizes what it is doing as making the exam "slightly enhanced" with new options in response to user feedback, market demand, and research. Weeks said the ACT will be strengthening its alignment with the common-core standards by offering some optional constructed-response modules and phasing into computer-based testing.

"ACT doesn't need an overhaul. We have always been curriculum-based and predictive," said Weeks, adding that the redesign of the SAT is a validation of the ACT approach. Now, 13 states offer the ACT to all high school juniors, and three more will be added this year, which is "testimony to the value" of the test, Weeks said.

In anticipation of the College Board announcement Wednesday, testing critic Bob Schaeffer of the advocacy group FairTest raised several questions about the new SAT on his organization's website.

"Can repackaging the SAT for the second time in less than a decade stall the growing perception that the ACT is a more student-friendly exam, even though it is neither a better nor fairer predictor of college performance? " asks Schaeffer.

Structural Changes

The new SAT will be three hours long, with an optional essay of 50 minutes. (The test now is three hours and 45 minutes, including the essay.) There will be three sections: "evidence-based reading and writing," math, and the optional essay. Without the required essay, the SAT will...
The SAT will have three sections: Evidence-based reading and writing, math, and the optional essay. Without the required essay, the SAT will return to a 1600-point scale.

Coleman said perhaps the most important change for students is that the College Board will remove the previous penalty for wrong answers and go to a simpler, transparent model of giving students points for the questions they answer correctly. The College Board has conducted research to ensure this change will not differentially affect any groups of students over others, according to McGrath of the College Board.

"The real advance is to make an SAT that openly rewards the best of high school work and that invites far more productive participation on the part of students and teachers," said Coleman.

The exam will also be offered in digital form at selected sites in states that have adopted the SAT. Officials don't know what percentage of students will opt to take the test on a computer.

Content Changes

The SAT essay component, which was included starting in 2005 as part of a new writing section, has not added value to predictions of writing success in college, according to the College Board. Admissions officers have been split as to the usefulness of the score, so, in 2016, it will be up to colleges to require the essay score—and up to students to decide to take it.

One key change to the new SAT will be more integration of reading and writing, with a strong focus on requiring students when they write to analyze texts, according Carol Jago, a past president of the National Council of Teachers of English, who is the chairwoman of the College Board's English Academic Advisory Committee.

"This is more reflective of the kind of writing they will be asked to do in college," Jago said. It is also a "fairer" approach, she contends, because all students will be responding to a specific prompt.

Coleman said in his speech that the College Board must take responsibility for "unintended consequences" of how the SAT asks students to write on the current test. Since there is no shared source material, only the coherence of the writing is assessed, but not the quality of the reasoning or the accuracy of the examples.

"But that's not how we all work in the world of college and career, where every day we analyze source materials and understand the claims and supporting evidence. In the age of the blog, fact-checking still matters," he said.

In other portions of the newly named "evidence-based reading and writing section," students will be asked to support answers by citing material in a passage and source documents from a range of disciplines, from science to social studies. Students will also need to analyze data and connect it to real-world contexts, the College Board says.

The new exam will include passages drawn from seminal American documents, such as the Declaration of Independence, the Federalist Papers, and the writings of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr.

"For those who want to get a jump-start on the SAT, here's the deal: Immerse yourself in some of the most remarkable expressions of the human spirit," Coleman said. "Their length is negligible, the language clear, the purposes exquisite. You don't even have to buy them; they are everywhere."

The vocabulary section is also getting a big makeover. In its overview, the College Board acknowledged that the current SAT is "focused on words that are sometimes obscure and not widely used in college and career." The revamped vocabulary section will focus more on relevant language students might use in college or on the job. This change will also level the playing field, Jago added. "What it rewards is not test prep, but wide reading," she said.

Jago said she is not concerned about the move to an optional essay because the essay has ended up often not being helpful in the college-application process. However, removing the essay requirement is likely to raise concerns among many educators, who may fear that it will be seen as downplaying the importance of developing strong writing and communications skills.

Math Changes

In math, the revised exam will focus in depth on three essential areas: problem-solving and data analysis (using ratios, percentages, and proportional reasoning to solve problems in science, social science, and career contexts), the heart of algebra (focusing on mastery of linear equations and systems), and what the College Board calls a "passport to advanced math." This last section will examine students' familiarity with more-complex equations and the manipulation they require, the College Board says.

Those areas are most likely to be used in a range of majors and will contribute most to college and career training, according to the College Board.
Another significant change concerns the use of calculators. Although students currently may use a calculator for all math questions, that's going to change. With the new SAT, a calculator will be allowed on one of two math sections. While calculators are important mathematical tools, College Board officials say the no-calculator section makes it easier to assess students' fluency in math and understanding of math concepts. It also rewards well-learned technique and number sense. That decision parallels plans by the two main common-core testing consortia, Smarter Balanced and PARCC, to allow calculators to be used only on certain portions of their math exams.

Photo: College Board President David Coleman announces changes to the SAT during an appearance Wednesday in Austin, Texas.—Erich Schlegel for Education Week