

Social mobility

The joy of test

NEW YORK

Why progressives should love standardised tests

SOMETIMES POLITICAL fights go on long after evidence that should settle the argument has come in. Such is the case with standardised tests. In February the Trump administration warned universities that eliminating standardised admissions tests to achieve racial diversity would be illegal. The Biden administration took the opposite stance: it encouraged colleges to consider dropping admissions tests like the SAT or ACT, which critics have long said favour the wealthy and disadvantage black Americans. In 2020, which already seems like another era, Ibram X. Kendi, author of "How to Be an Antiracist", called the tests "the most effective racist weapon ever devised to...exclude [black and brown students] from prestigious schools."

He could hardly have been more wrong. During the covid-19 pandemic, hundreds of universities made submitting scores optional because it was hard to consistently administer tests. Many then stuck with the policy. In March 2022 MIT decided to reinstate a mandatory test policy. For two years, "we were the lone wolf" among the "Ivy Plus" schools (the eight Ivies plus Chicago, Duke, MIT and Stanford), says MIT's dean of admissions, Stuart Schmill. "We were getting dirty looks everywhere." Now tests are making a comeback in top-tier schools. Eight of the Ivy Plus have belatedly followed MIT's lead, most recently Penn in February. Princeton and Duke, two of four remaining holdouts, have yet to announce their policy for 2026.

Critics of standardised tests say that high-school grade-point averages (GPAs) are a better predictor of student potential. In studies that compare the two, much evidence backs that claim. For instance, a 2020 study found that GPAs of Chicago Public School students predicted six-year graduation rates better than ACT scores, while a 2019 study found grades in a national sample of 47,000 students better predicted on-time graduation than tests.

The disagreement arises partly because each side is measuring something different. A new paper by John Friedman of Brown and Bruce Sacerdote, Douglas Staiger and Michele Tine of Dartmouth College uses scores and transcripts of 14,620 students from 2017 to 2024 at many of the Ivy Plus schools. The study found that scores on SATs and ACTs predict how college students do far better than high-school GPAs, controlling for gender, race



Preppies

and parental income (see chart).

So the correct answer in the test v grade battle? It depends on how selective the university is. There is much less variation in grades of students today than there has been in the past—which some studies suggest is due to grade inflation—making it more difficult for top-tier schools to distinguish between applicants with impressive grades. By contrast, Mr Friedman says, there is enough "meaningful" variation in test scores to offer a "super helpful" signal for top-tier schools. Variation at the top is less important for a less selective school.

Likewise, average grades pick up attri-

butes such as attendance and self-regulation that have bearing in, say, predicting graduation from a community college, but less for distinguishing between high-flyers for whom such attributes are more of a given. "Graduation rates are all extremely high at Ivy Plus schools, so there is nothing to predict there," says Mr Friedman. In the 2019 study where GPAs prevailed in predicting on-time graduation, only 39% of the students graduated on time.

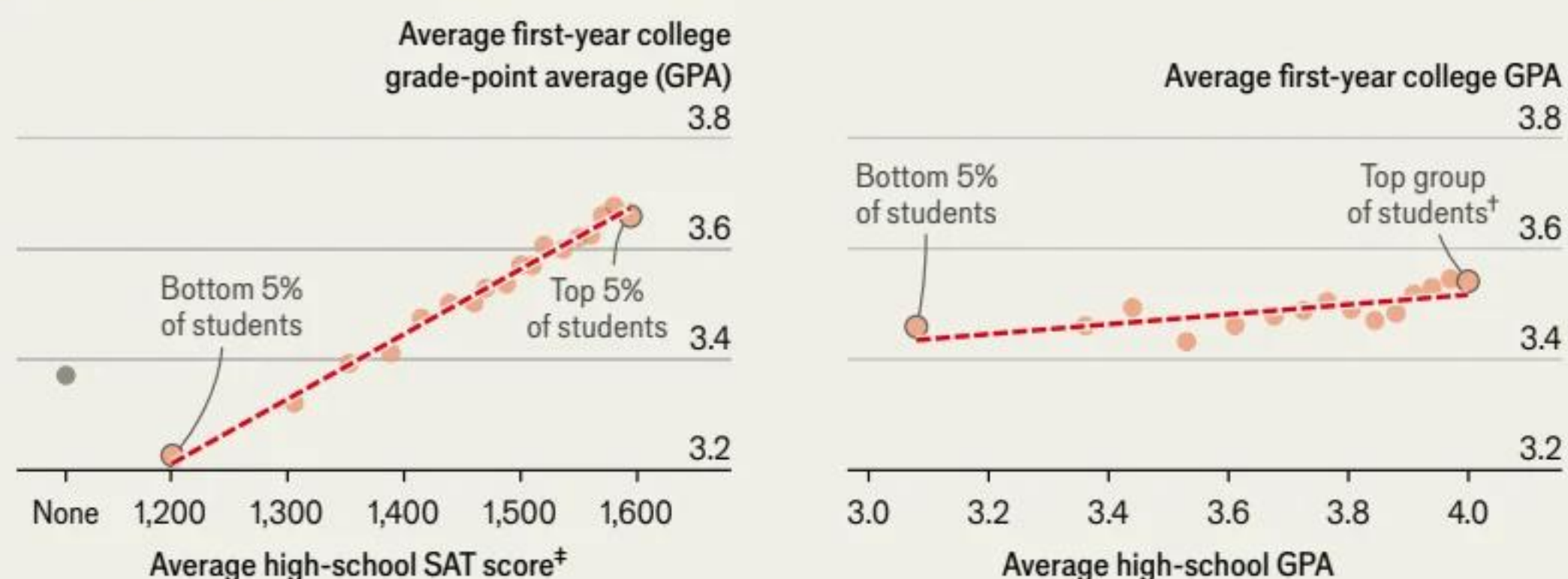
What about fairness? Test critics like FairTest, a non-profit advocacy group, point to gaps in exam scores between students of different racial groups, which they say leads to racial bias in admissions. But tests don't create poor academic preparation, they just pick it up, says Mr Friedman. The new study found that students from different backgrounds with the same scores achieved similar college grades.

In fact, tests can help poorer students get admitted to top schools. It may be harder to evaluate grades earned by students in little-known high schools than by students at better-regarded places that offer advanced coursework, says Mr Schmill. Richer students also have more opportunities to do expensive enrichment activities that strengthen their applications, and may receive expert essay editing. A plethora of free test-prep material available online, such as Khan Academy courses, helps level the test playing field; Schoolhouse, a Khan offshoot, offers free tutoring.

Test-optional policies may actually harm disadvantaged students. Brown, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard and MIT reported concern that some students did not report test scores that were strong but below elite institutions' average for accepted students without realising that, in combination with their disadvantaged backgrounds, those results would have helped them. At a time when America's elite universities are rethinking admissions, the idea that tests benefit poorer students is a solid principle to hold on to. ■

Score one for tests

Ivy-plus college students, 2017-23*



*14,620 students attending unnamed schools among Ivy League, Chicago, Duke, MIT and Stanford, excluding the incoming class in 2020

[‡]28% of students with a 4.0 high-school GPA [‡]An SAT-equivalent score was assigned if the student took the ACT

Source: "Standardised test scores and academic performance at Ivy-plus colleges", by J. Friedman et al., March 2025, NBER working paper