Boycott the SAT

On affirmative action and the Educational Testing Service

We have often had occasion to note how egalitarianism turns out to be the enemy of genuine fairness. The latest example is a new program developed by the Educational Testing Service, the folks that bring us the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SATs). It is called Strivers. Comparing it to race-based affirmative action, Amy Dockser Marcus, reporting on the program recently in The Wall Street Journal, noted that Strivers is designed to give colleges a tool for bringing social equity into the admissions process.

Ms. Marcus likened the idea behind Strivers to a golf handicap. In light of the recent revelations about President Clinton’s habit of retaking shots without penalty, the analogy from golf seemed especially apt. Here’s how it works. The ETS has come up with a formula that will generate what it calls an expected SAT score for every student by considering fourteen extrinsic factors: factors such as family income, whether English is the student’s first or second language, whether the student’s high school is in a depressed inner-city neighborhood, whether more than 50 percent of the students in the student’s school receive a subsidized lunch, and if requested race and ethnicity.

Following guidelines set by the new program, if a student scores 200 or more points higher than the expected score generated by the ETS, he or she would be considered a Striver, and thus eligible for special treatment by college admissions. (Though students would not necessarily be informed of their special status.) One ETS official put it this way: A combined score of 1000 on the SATs is not always a 1000. When you look at a Striver who gets a 1000, you’re looking at someone who really performs at a 1200. Really? George Orwell put the same point just a little differently: All animals are equal, Orwell wrote in Animal Farm, but some animals are more equal than others.

The ETS pretends that it can conjure an expected score based on various sociological and ethnic variables. But we feel constrained to ask: Expected by whom? Such statistical legerdemain always discounts the most important variables of all: individual talent and hard work. With an irony common in the dizzy world of affirmative-action initiatives (how Orwell would have savored that
specimen example of Newspeak!), the Strivers program penalizes especially those students who really do exert themselves and strive to excel.

We are not the only ones to notice this. Indeed, The Wall Street Journal’s scoop elicited a blizzard of criticism. The ETS responded in time-honored fashion: with stout denial. In an op-ed piece for The New York Times, Nicholas Lemann—who acknowledges that he believes **the spirit behind the Strivers program is the right one**—reported that, the day after the Journal article appeared, the ETS issued talking points to all employees that said **There is no product, no program, and no service based upon the Strivers research.**

There has always been plenty to criticize about the Educational Testing Service in general and the SATs in particular. But once upon a time those tests, as their name implies, did endeavor to provide some dispassionate measure of scholastic aptitude. They were known as **standardized tests** because everyone who took the test was graded according to the same criteria. If you filled in the third of five circles and that was the correct answer, you scored a point. It did not matter whether you were white or black, male or female, Christian or Jewish, rich or poor, Democrat or Republican. The only thing that mattered was whether you got the question right.

Unfortunately, such objective tests have never yielded the results that egalitarians desire. Indeed, egalitarians have always abominated the very idea of objectivity, and have striven mightily to convince people either that there is no such thing as an objective measure or that objective measures are inherently unfair. When it comes to objective measures of scholastic aptitude and accomplishment, they have employed a battery of legal and rhetorical devices to undermine the truth. Instead of treating individuals equally, egalitarians have endeavored to induce the illusion of equality by the skillful deployment of preferential treatment. Hence Mr. Lemann, true to form, assures readers of the Times that the letters SAT, though originally an acronym for Scholastic Aptitude Test, today literally don’t stand for anything. Why, then, should we employ such tests? Because they provide a convenient means of seeming to be even-handed while actually tipping the scale. Mr. Lemann is admirably explicit about this: **The only way to produce a result that looks fairer is to engage in explicit social engineering, tinkering with test scores in a way that seems unfair to those who have the high ones.** Seems, Lemann? Nay, it is. Still, it is gratifying to have the liberal sophistry out in the open for once.

At a time when legal challenges to affirmative action programs are on the rise (California’s Proposition 209 is doubtless the best known), successfully circumventing genuine fairness for the sake of egalitarian ideology has required more and more ingenuity. Liberal colleges and universities looking for a way of sidestepping legal restrictions on preferential treatment are sure to appreciate the opportunities for racial and ethnic gerrymandering that the ETS has opened up with programs like Strivers, even if, for the moment, common sense has stymied ideology.

The fact is that the Strivers program is part of a new, more insidious breed of what Mr. Lemann correctly calls social engineering initiatives. Designed to impose quotas without using the politically unpopular word, they are part of what the English essayist G. K. Chesterton
long ago referred to as "the false theory of progress, which maintains that we alter the test instead of trying to pass the test." Programs like Strivers—and notwithstanding the ETS's temporary retreat, be assured that we haven't heard the end of it—are unfair to everyone. They are especially unfair to those students who apply themselves and outdo the expectations foisted on them by paternalistic sociologists from the ETS or liberal ideologues like Nicholas Lemann. Students and parents should be on their guard against this latest species of social engineering. Colleges and universities not totally in thrall to egalitarian ideology should boycott it.