PIVOT

# The Virginia SAT School Day: A Policy Framework for Educational Equity

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## Executive Summary

This comprehensive research report examines the critical need for implementing a statewide Virginia SAT School Day program, with analysis focused on both national standardized testing equity issues and Virginia's specific educational landscape. Rather than a traditional policy brief, this document serves as an introduction to understanding the complex dynamics surrounding standardized testing policy, with particular relevance to Virginia's educational equity challenges.

In Virginia, only 51% of high school graduates in the Class of 2024 took the SAT during high school—approximately 49,631 students out of 98,180 total graduates. Of these Virginia test-takers, only 52% met both college readiness benchmarks, revealing significant gaps in preparation across demographic groups. The data exposes stark inequities within the Commonwealth: while 76% of Asian students and 60% of White students met both benchmarks, only 23% of Black/African American students and 38% of Hispanic/Latino students achieved the same level.

Currently, 41% of Virginia SAT test-takers used School Day programs, with 28% taking the test exclusively during school hours. Students who took the SAT only on School Day averaged 960, compared to 1147 for weekend-only test-takers, highlighting both the program's reach to underserved populations and the need for comprehensive preparation support.

Key findings from national research indicate that standardized tests often reflect a student's financial resources more than their academic abilities, with students from the top 1% of income distribution being 13 times more likely than those from the bottom 20 percent to achieve high scores. In Virginia specifically, students from the highest income quintile averaged 1166 on the SAT, while those from the lowest quintile averaged only 937—a 229-point gap that significantly impacts college admissions prospects.

This report recommends implementing a statewide SAT School Day program to ensure equitable access, normalize college preparation expectations, and address the opportunity gaps that prevent many Virginia students from accessing higher education pathways. This research has been presented to three Virginia state delegates and will potentially be introduced as a bill in the upcoming legislative cycle.

## National Socioeconomic Divide

For decades, the question of fairness in college admissions has centered around one controversial factor: standardized tests. The SAT and ACT were designed as equalizing tools that provide a common measure for students from diverse educational backgrounds. However, over time, these tests have become powerful indicators of socioeconomic privilege, often reflecting a student's resources more than their aptitude. "Students from families in the top 1% of income distribution are 13 times more likely than those from the bottom 20 percent to score 1300 or higher on the SAT," observes Professor Evan Mandery, an expert on educational inequality and the author of Poison Ivy: How Elite Colleges Divide Us (Mandery). In response to increasing criticism, many universities have adopted test-optional policies, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, to mitigate these inequities (Einhorn).

Yet, in 2024, many prestigious schools like Dartmouth and Yale reversed course, announcing that they will once again require an SAT or ACT score from applicants (Natanson and Svrluga). As colleges continue to weigh the role of these exams, the question remains: do standardized tests reflect students' true potential, or do they deepen the divide between those with privilege and those without? This report explores how socioeconomic disparities affect access to test preparation, evaluates whether standardized testing can fairly measure academic potential, and considers the long-term educational and societal impacts of reliance on standardized testing in college admissions.

Access to test preparation varies widely depending on socioeconomic status. This discrepancy highlights a core issue with standardized testing—scores too often reflect a student's financial background rather

than their true academic abilities. According to a study by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), a respected nonprofit research organization focused on higher education policy and access, the base cost of taking a standardized test like the SAT ranges from $52 to $70 but additional costs for test prep books, classes, and private tutoring can reach $10,000. This creates a serious barrier for low-income students, who are left at a disadvantage before they even step into the testing room (Institute for Higher Education Policy). Supporting this, the IHEP report also shows that those who work with private tutors, the most expensive form of test preparation, yield significantly higher score improvements compared to those using free online resources, which show minimal impact.

On the other hand, Raj Chetty, David Deming, and John Friedman, three prominent Harvard researchers known for their influential work in economics and education policy, challenge the assumption that eliminating standardized tests would resolve these inequities, pointing out that wealth continues to influence many other aspects of college admissions. They argue that affluent students still benefit from paid essay help, access to specific extracurriculars and sports, and enrollment in prestigious summer programs, all of which give them an edge (Chetty, Deming, Friedman 3). As David Deming explains in an interview with The Harvard Gazette, "If we get rid of the SAT, you're getting rid of the only way that a low-income student who's academically talented has to distinguish themselves. Getting rid of the SAT means those people don't have the opportunity to be noticed" (Mineo). Although Deming and colleagues see standardized testing as a way for low-income students to demonstrate academic strengths, the IHEP report highlights financial barriers in test prep that would prevent low-income students from doing as well. This tension underscores the complex socioeconomic factors involved in standardized testing and its relevance in admissions.

## Virginia's Current Reality

Virginia's data reinforces these national patterns while revealing state-specific challenges. Of the 98,180 students who graduated from Virginia high schools in 2024, only 49,631 (51%) took the SAT during their

high school career. This means nearly half of Virginia's graduates never took the test that remains crucial for college admissions at many institutions.

In Virginia, 13% of SAT test-takers used fee waivers, indicating significant populations who benefit from free testing access. Students who used fee waivers averaged 1039 on the SAT compared to 1173 for those who did not use waivers—a 134-point gap that reflects underlying socioeconomic disparities. Virginia's income-based performance gaps are substantial: students from the highest income quintile ($117,610+) averaged 1166, while those from the lowest quintile ($0-$55,667) averaged 937—a 229-point difference. Only 3% of Virginia's SAT test-takers came from the lowest income quintile, suggesting that the most economically disadvantaged students may not be taking the test at all.

## Questioning Assessment Methods

The notion that standardized tests are objective measures of academic potential has been increasingly questioned by scholars who argue that these exams reinforce socioeconomic and cultural biases. Couch, Frost, and colleagues, researchers focused on educational psychology, explore how standardized tests disproportionately impact African American students through factors like racial segregation, cultural bias, and stereotype threat—a psychological phenomenon where fear of confirming negative stereotypes can impair performance (Couch et al. 2). They argue that these factors create a disadvantage for African American students, as stereotypes around low test scores heighten test anxiety and lower performance, perpetuating inequities in college admissions.

Further supporting this view, Sunny Niu and Marta Tienda, researchers at Princeton University, found that high school class rank, a metric less influenced by socioeconomic factors, is actually a more reliable predictor of college success than standardized test scores. Their study across five Texas universities shows that while test scores often mirror socioeconomic background, class rank reflects qualities like drive and effort, which directly impact college performance. Top-ranking students from low-income schools,

despite scoring lower on standardized tests, performed as well as or better than wealthier peers with higher test scores but lower class ranks. This finding suggests that standardized tests may not fully capture a student's potential, especially for those from under-resourced schools (Niu and Tienda).

In contrast, some studies argue that the SAT has some predictive power for college success even when socioeconomic factors are controlled for, suggesting it may measure certain academic skills relevant to college performance. College Board researchers Paul Sackett et al., found a moderate correlation ($r = 0.42$) between students' socioeconomic status (SES) and their SAT scores, indicating that students from higher SES backgrounds tend to score higher. Although this correlation highlights how wealthier students benefit from resources like test preparation, Sackett and his colleagues also examined the SAT's predictive validity for freshman GPA. They found that controlling for SES only slightly reduced the SAT-GPA correlation, from 0.47 to 0.44, suggesting that the SAT does capture some academic skills relevant to college success, regardless of socioeconomic background. While Sackett's study suggests the SAT measures certain academic skills, Niu and Tienda's findings reveal its limitations, especially for students without access to costly prep. In the end, although the SAT offers some insights, it remains a biased measure that tends to favor wealthier students, reinforcing existing inequalities.

## Evidence from Virginia

Virginia's 2024 data provides clear evidence of these persistent disparities. Among Virginia test-takers, different racial and ethnic groups showed significant performance gaps: American Indian/Alaska Native students averaged 991, Asian students averaged 1236, Black/African American students averaged 956, Hispanic/Latino students averaged 1033, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander students averaged 1043, White students averaged 1142, and students of Two or More Races averaged 1133.

The benchmark achievement data tells an even starker story. While 76% of Asian students and 60% of White students in Virginia met both college readiness benchmarks, only 23% of Black/African American

students, 33% of American Indian/Alaska Native students, and 38% of Hispanic/Latino students achieved the same level. These gaps persist despite the fact that all these students were academically engaged enough to take the SAT.

## Long-Term Educational and Societal Impacts

The reliance on standardized testing in college admissions has only deepened socioeconomic inequalities, keeping existing social hierarchies firmly in place. Mark J. Garrison, an educational policy professor at West Texas A&M University, argues that standardized tests primarily benefit students with access to resources like private tutoring, thus perpetuating socioeconomic privilege. Higher scores often reflect access to these resources more than academic ability, reinforcing what Garrison calls the "myth of meritocracy." This myth suggests that test scores indicate potential and worth, which, he argues, unfairly limits access to educational opportunities for disadvantaged students and hinders social mobility (Garrison 4).

Wayne Au, an educational theorist at the University of Washington Bothell, expands on Garrison's argument, examining how standardized testing hides racial and economic inequalities. Au explains that testing, historically rooted in eugenics and "objective" intelligence measurement, was originally designed to sort people by perceived merit—a measure closely tied to social privilege. This legacy continues, as standardized tests seem neutral but reflect resource access. According to Au, this system reinforces class and racial hierarchies, validating the social status of privileged students while marginalizing those without test prep support (Au 9).

Similarly, Eric Grodsky, John Robert Warren, and Felicia Felts from the University of California, Davis, found that standardized testing often reflects a student's access to resources like tutoring, rather than natural academic ability. This deepens socioeconomic divides by limiting college access for marginalized students, restricting their future professional opportunities. Thus, instead of promoting fairness,

standardized testing perpetuates social stratification, obstructing upward mobility and sustaining inequalities across generations (Grodsky, Warren, Felts 389).

### Virginia's Intergenerational Patterns

Virginia's data illustrates these long-term impacts through clear intergenerational patterns. Students whose parents have graduate degrees averaged 1197 on the SAT, while those whose parents lack high school diplomas averaged only 952—a 245-point gap. The percentage distributions are equally telling: 32% of Virginia test-takers have parents with graduate degrees, while only 3% have parents without high school diplomas.

The parental education impact extends to benchmark achievement as well. In Virginia, 69% of students whose parents have graduate degrees met both college readiness benchmarks, compared to only 24% of students whose parents lack high school diplomas. This 45-percentage-point gap demonstrates how family educational background creates lasting advantages that standardized testing may amplify rather than overcome.

## The Case for Virginia SAT School Day: Current Evidence and Policy Rationale

### Uneven College Preparedness and Access

Many students are not even entering the pipeline of college readiness because they do not see the SAT as accessible or relevant. When SAT testing is optional, many students—particularly those from under-resourced communities—opt out or delay testing until it's too late to prepare or retake it. This creates a gap in opportunity, not just in scores, but in mindset and preparation. Currently the SAT costs $60 every time you want to take it.

Virginia's School Day data demonstrates both the promise and limitations of current access initiatives. In 2024, 20,117 Virginia students (41% of all test-takers) took the SAT through School Day programs. Of these, 13,837 students took the test exclusively during school hours, while 6,280 combined School Day testing with weekend testing. The performance differences are significant: students who took the SAT only on School Day averaged 960, while those who combined School Day and weekend testing averaged 1195, and weekend-only test-takers averaged 1147.

These data points reveal several critical insights. First, School Day programs are successfully reaching students who might not otherwise test—evidenced by the lower average scores of School Day-only test-takers, suggesting these programs capture students from less advantaged backgrounds. Second, students who use School Day as a starting point and then retake on weekends show substantial improvement, indicating that early exposure through School Day can catalyze continued engagement with college preparation.

By instituting an SAT School Day, Virginia would normalize the expectation that all students, regardless of background, are college-eligible and should be given a fair shot. Mandating the test ensures that all students are exposed to the college admissions process, low-stakes first exposure allows them to plan for retakes, and preparation becomes systemic, not dependent on external resources.

## Colleges Reinstating Standardized Testing Requirements

The landscape of college admissions has undergone significant shifts since the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily accelerated test-optional policies. However, in 2024, numerous prestigious institutions have reversed course and reinstated SAT/ACT requirements, including Brown, California Institute of Technology, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, Stanford, the University of Texas at Austin, and Yale. On February 5, 2024, Dartmouth College announced that it would return to requiring SAT or ACT test scores for college admission, basing its decision off research by a faculty committee.

For the 2025-2026 cycle, over half the Ivy League will once again be requiring all applicants to submit a test score. This trend extends beyond elite institutions: prestigious universities including MIT, Georgetown, Caltech, and Purdue have also reinstated requirements. As one admissions expert noted, "There were a number of institutions that never would have chosen to have gone test-optional except the pandemic made them. Those institutions, by and large, are going back to requiring test scores".

The rationale for these reversals centers on research findings about predictive validity and equity concerns. Many institutions found that standardized tests, despite their limitations, provide valuable information for identifying talented students from diverse backgrounds who might otherwise be overlooked in holistic review processes.

## Standardized Testing and Admission Success

Even at institutions that remain test-optional, submitting SAT scores provides measurable advantages in admissions outcomes. Research consistently demonstrates that test scores significantly improve admission probabilities, even when controlling for other factors.

At the University of Virginia, despite maintaining test-optional policies, 72% of admitted students submitted test scores, suggesting that scores remain highly valuable in the admissions process. Similarly, at the University of Georgia, students who submitted test scores had a 49% admission rate compared to only 26% for those who did not submit scores—a nearly two-to-one advantage.

These patterns extend to merit-based financial aid and competitive program admission. SAT scores often serve as initial screening criteria for merit scholarships, honors programs, and competitive majors, particularly in STEM fields where quantitative preparation is crucial. For Virginia students, this is particularly relevant given the state's emphasis on technology and engineering industries.

Virginia's college-bound students are already demonstrating strategic understanding of these dynamics. Among Virginia students who sent SAT scores to colleges, the top destinations were Virginia Tech (23.4%

of score senders), University of Virginia (21.5%), and George Mason University (20.1%). This data suggests that high-achieving Virginia students recognize the value of standardized test scores for admission to competitive in-state institutions.

## Predictive Validity

The debate over standardized testing's predictive validity has been extensively researched, with mounting evidence supporting the SAT's utility in predicting college performance. College Board research demonstrates that SAT scores remain consistently predictive of cumulative GPA through each year of college, and these findings hold for all student and institutional subgroups examined. Through each year of college, the SAT added unique and useful information above high school GPA to predict student outcomes.

Recent studies have shown that SAT scores improved the ability to predict college success above high school GPA alone, and there was a strong positive correlation between scores on the redesigned SAT and grades in related college course domains. This finding is particularly significant for Virginia, where high school grading standards and course rigor vary substantially across the state's 132 school divisions.

A 2024 study examining Ivy Plus universities found that students with higher SAT and ACT scores also tend to achieve higher college GPAs, reinforcing the predictive relationship between standardized test performance and academic success in rigorous college environments.

The predictive validity argument becomes especially compelling when considering Virginia's diverse educational landscape. While affluent districts like Fairfax County may have consistent grading standards and extensive AP offerings, rural districts may have different grading practices and limited advanced coursework. In this context, standardized test scores provide a common metric for evaluating academic preparation across diverse educational environments.

## Why Universal Testing Matters for Equity

Virginia's current SAT participation rate of 51% reveals a fundamental equity problem: nearly half of the state's graduates are excluded from college opportunities that require or benefit from standardized test scores. This exclusion disproportionately affects students from low-income families, first-generation college students, and those attending under-resourced schools.

Geographic disparities compound these inequities. Virginia's data shows that 52% of test-takers attend suburban schools, 23% attend town/rural schools, and 19% attend city schools. Students in suburban schools averaged 1111, while city schools averaged 1081 and town/rural schools averaged 1086. While these gaps are smaller than socioeconomic disparities, they represent systematic barriers that a universal testing program could address.

Districts like Fairfax, Prince William, and Arlington already offer SAT School Day and demonstrate higher participation rates and better outcomes for traditionally underserved populations. These successful local programs provide proof of concept for statewide implementation.

Transportation barriers, test fees, and weekend scheduling conflicts create particularly acute challenges for rural and low-income students. SAT School Day eliminates these obstacles by providing testing during regular school hours at no cost to students or families. This approach transforms testing from an additional burden into a routine part of the educational experience.

## Targeting the Opportunity Gap

Virginia's existing School Day programs reveal stark disparities that universal implementation could address. The performance gaps are significant: in Virginia, Asian students averaged 1236 and White students averaged 1142, while Black/African American students averaged 956 and Hispanic/Latino students averaged 1033.

However, School Day participation data suggests these programs successfully reach underserved populations. The 960 average score for School Day-only test-takers likely represents students who would not have tested otherwise—expanding access rather than lowering standards. The 6,280 students who combined School Day with weekend testing, averaging 1195, demonstrate how initial exposure can motivate continued engagement with college preparation.

National research supports this pattern. States with universal SAT School Day programs report increased college enrollment rates among first-generation students, students from Title I schools, and rural populations. The key insight is that mandatory, in-school testing normalizes college planning expectations and ensures all students have opportunities to retake, prepare strategically, and apply to institutions that require or prefer test scores.

For Virginia specifically, universal SAT School Day would ensure that talented students in all 132 school divisions have equal access to college opportunities, regardless of their family's college knowledge, financial resources, or geographic location. This represents a fundamental equity intervention that could reshape educational opportunity across the Commonwealth.

## Addressing the Preparation Paradox

However, universal testing access alone does not resolve the fundamental tension identified in this analysis: while standardized tests demonstrate predictive validity for college success, they simultaneously reflect socioeconomic privilege through differential access to test preparation resources. Simply mandating that all students take the SAT could potentially exacerbate inequities by exposing preparation gaps more starkly while providing no additional support to disadvantaged students.

This creates what we term the "preparation paradox"—universal testing without universal preparation support may amplify rather than reduce educational inequities. Wealthy students will continue accessing expensive private tutoring and test preparation services, while low-income students face a mandatory test

for which they receive no additional preparation support. The result could be systematically lower scores for disadvantaged students, potentially reinforcing rather than challenging existing hierarchies.

Virginia's current School Day data illustrates this concern: the 134-point gap between fee waiver users (1039) and non-users (1173) demonstrates how economic disadvantage translates directly into score disparities. Mandating universal participation without addressing preparation gaps could make these disparities more visible and consequential for students' futures.

## Policy Implementation Framework

### Established Precedent

Virginia would join a growing number of states that have recognized the equity benefits of universal standardized testing. Currently, ten states require the SAT for graduation: Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Indiana, Michigan, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, Rhode Island, and West Virginia. These states have demonstrated that large-scale SAT administration is logistically feasible and educationally beneficial.

Additionally, several states provide funding for SAT School Day without mandating participation, including Idaho, Maine, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Washington, D.C. This voluntary approach has shown success in increasing participation rates while maintaining local flexibility. However, Virginia's data suggests that voluntary programs may not fully address equity gaps, as evidenced by the concentration of current School Day programs in affluent districts like Fairfax and Arlington.

Research from states with universal programs shows consistent benefits: increased college enrollment rates, particularly among first-generation college students; improved college readiness awareness across all demographic groups; and enhanced ability for colleges to identify talented students from diverse backgrounds.

## Legislative Foundation

Virginia has already established the groundwork for SAT School Day implementation through the 2018 HB1118 legislation, which was approved but left unfunded in appropriations. The bill's framework remains legally and administratively sound, requiring the Board of Education to establish and maintain an SAT School Day Program whereby each public high school junior in the Commonwealth participates in the SAT free of charge during a select school day.

The 2018 legislation included comprehensive provisions for program administration. It established that a special nonreverting fund would be created in the state treasury, known as the SAT School Day Fund, managed by the Comptroller. The fund would receive all appropriated funds plus any gifts, donations, grants, and bequests, with interest earnings remaining in the fund. Expenditures would be made by the State Treasurer on warrants issued by the Comptroller upon written request by the Superintendent of Public Instruction.

The fiscal impact analysis from 2018 estimated a cost of $5.7 million per year based on 94,457 high school juniors and a cost of $60 per SAT exam registration. Adjusting for current enrollment and inflation, the cost would likely range from $6-7 million annually, representing approximately 0.02% of Virginia's total education budget.

## Cost Analysis and Funding

The financial investment required for statewide SAT School Day implementation is modest relative to potential benefits. At the standard rate of $60 per student, testing all Virginia juniors would cost approximately $6 million annually. However, the College Board offers substantial discounts for state contracts: 20% for standard agreements and up to 45% for districts with high percentages of economically disadvantaged students.

Given Virginia's demographic profile, the effective cost per student could be reduced to approximately $35-45, bringing the total annual cost to $4-5 million. This investment would potentially double Virginia's SAT participation rate from 51% to over 90%, representing exceptional value in terms of expanded educational opportunity.

Funding mechanisms could include dedicated state appropriations, federal education grants, or public-private partnerships with Virginia's technology and business communities, which benefit from an educated workforce. The long-term economic benefits—including increased college graduation rates and higher lifetime earnings for Virginia residents—would generate substantial returns on this investment through increased tax revenues and economic development.

## Implementation Strategy

A successful statewide rollout requires careful planning and phased implementation. Virginia should prioritize districts that currently lack School Day programs, particularly those serving high percentages of low-income and first-generation college students. This approach would maximize equity benefits while allowing program refinement before full implementation.

The optimal testing window would be October-November, avoiding conflicts with Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOL) assessments, Advanced Placement exams, and other standardized testing. This timing also provides students with results in time for college application deadlines and opportunities for spring retesting if desired.

Administrative coordination across Virginia's 132 school divisions requires extensive planning, but successful models exist in districts like Fairfax, Prince William, and Arlington. These districts can serve as mentors and resources for divisions implementing School Day programs for the first time.

Quality assurance measures should include standardized preparation materials, professional development for school counselors and administrators, and comprehensive data collection to track program effectiveness and identify areas for improvement.

## Addressing Implementation Concerns

**Cost Management**: The $60 base cost per student can be significantly reduced through state negotiation and income-based discounts. A pilot program could demonstrate cost-effectiveness and build legislative support for full funding.

**Academic Impact**: Research from existing School Day states shows no decrease in average scores when universal testing is implemented. Virginia's current data supports this finding: the 960 average for School Day-only test-takers represents expanded access rather than lowered standards. Students often retake the test after initial exposure, with Virginia data showing 6,280 students combined School Day with weekend testing, achieving significantly higher scores.

**Testing Burden**: School Day testing reduces rather than increases burden on students and families by eliminating weekend travel, registration fees, and scheduling conflicts. The fall testing window avoids overlap with SOL and AP exams. Virginia already uses AP exams as SOL substitutes in some cases, demonstrating flexibility in assessment policy.

**Equity Concerns**: Universal participation ensures that socioeconomic status no longer determines SAT access. Currently, only 3% of Virginia test-takers come from the lowest income quintile, suggesting voluntary testing excludes the most disadvantaged students. Mandatory participation would guarantee that all students, regardless of family college knowledge or resources, receive exposure to college admissions processes.

## Long-term Vision

SAT School Day represents the foundation of a comprehensive college readiness system, but it must be coupled with systematic preparation support to achieve true equity. Virginia should implement a multi-tiered approach that addresses both access and preparation gaps:

**Curriculum Integration (Years 1-2 of Implementation):** Virginia should integrate SAT preparation into the standard 10th and 11th-grade curriculum, ensuring that test-taking strategies and reasoning skills become part of regular instruction rather than expensive add-ons. This approach transforms preparation from a privilege into a systematic educational component.

**Summer Bridge Programs (Year 2 of Implementation):** Establish intensive summer preparation academies for students from Title I schools and first-generation college families. These programs would provide both academic content review and college navigation support, addressing the broader information gaps that disadvantage low-income students.

**Digital Equity Initiative (Year 1 of Implementation):** Partner with organizations like Khan Academy to provide free, high-quality digital preparation resources to all Virginia students. This includes ensuring that all students have device and internet access necessary for digital preparation platforms.

**Professional Development for Educators (Ongoing):** Train Virginia teachers to integrate college-level reasoning and SAT-style analytical thinking into regular coursework. This ensures that preparation becomes embedded in daily instruction rather than relegated to separate test prep sessions.

**Enhanced School Counseling Support (Years 1-3):** Expand school counseling programs to include systematic college preparation support, with particular focus on schools serving high percentages of first-generation college students. Counselors should receive training on financial aid, college selection, and standardized testing strategy.

The program would generate comprehensive data on student preparation across all Virginia divisions, enabling targeted interventions and resource allocation. It would also strengthen connections between

high schools and colleges, as universal participation encourages systematic college counseling and preparation support.

Most importantly, this comprehensive approach would shift cultural expectations about college attendance while providing the tools necessary for success. Rather than simply mandating testing, Virginia would be creating a systematic support structure that addresses the root causes of educational inequality. When both standardized testing and preparation support become routine parts of high school experience, college planning becomes normalized and accessible rather than exceptional and privilege-dependent.

This holistic approach recognizes that achieving educational equity requires more than equal access to testing—it demands equal preparation, support, and opportunity for all Virginia students to demonstrate their potential and pursue their aspirations.

## Impact Assessment

### Projected Positive Outcomes

**Increased College Access**: Based on current participation patterns, statewide implementation could increase Virginia's SAT participation from 51% to potentially 90%+ of graduates. This would represent approximately 40,000-50,000 additional students annually having access to standardized testing.

**Enhanced Educational Equity**: Virginia's current 229-point gap between highest and lowest income quintiles could be addressed through universal access to testing and preparation. Districts currently without School Day programs would gain parity with affluent districts like Fairfax and Arlington.

**Improved State Economic Development**: Virginia's economy depends on maintaining its educated workforce advantage. Higher college enrollment rates correlate with increased economic productivity and state tax revenues, providing long-term return on investment.

**Data-Driven School Improvement**: Universal testing would provide comprehensive data on student preparation across all Virginia districts, enabling more targeted interventions and resource allocation.

## Implementation Challenges

**Initial Cost Investment**: The estimated $5.7 million annual cost requires dedicated legislative appropriation. However, this represents approximately 0.02% of Virginia's education budget and could potentially be offset through increased federal funding that follows college-bound students.

**Administrative Complexity**: Coordinating testing across Virginia's 132 school divisions requires significant logistical planning. However, existing successful programs in major districts provide proven models.

**Stakeholder Resistance**: Some educators and parents may oppose increased testing. Virginia's experience with SOL assessments provides lessons for managing implementation concerns.

## Risk Mitigation Strategies

**Pilot Program Validation**: Implement first in regions with high need but no current School Day programs, such as rural districts that could benefit from increased college access opportunities.

**Stakeholder Engagement**: Conduct extensive outreach through Virginia School Boards Association, Virginia Association of School Superintendents, and Parent Teacher Associations to build support and address concerns.

**Continuous Evaluation**: Establish metrics to track program effectiveness using Virginia's existing data systems and partnerships with state universities.

**Resource Support**: Provide additional funding for test preparation resources, professional development, and college counseling support to maximize the program's impact.

## Conclusion

In summation, standardized testing in college admissions often reinforces inequalities by rewarding students who can afford test prep, rather than truly measuring academic potential. Originally intended to level the playing field, these tests now reflect socioeconomic privilege, favoring those with access to costly resources. Research suggests that standardized tests measure a student's resources more than their abilities, making them an unreliable gauge of potential. This heavy emphasis on testing limits social mobility, building barriers that disadvantaged students struggle to overcome. Moving forward, colleges could consider a more holistic admissions process that values achievements and resilience, paving a more inclusive path to higher education.

However, implementing a statewide SAT School Day is a strategic, research-backed, and logistically feasible way to increase access to higher education for thousands of Virginia students. By mandating a low-barrier, early exposure to college admissions testing, this policy ensures that no student is left behind because of cost, confusion, or low expectations. It is a clear, scalable intervention to increase college readiness and close longstanding opportunity gaps.

Virginia's current data reveals both the scope of the challenge and the potential for transformation: with only 51% of graduates taking the SAT and significant performance gaps across demographic groups, universal School Day implementation could fundamentally change educational opportunity in the Commonwealth. The 41% of Virginia test-takers who used School Day programs in 2024 represent a substantial foundation upon which to build statewide access.

The path toward educational equity requires sustained commitment from policymakers, educational institutions, and communities across Virginia. While the challenges are significant—from the $5.7 million annual investment to coordinating across 132 school divisions—the potential benefits extend far beyond individual students to encompass Virginia's economic competitiveness and social cohesion. Moving

forward, Virginia should implement the SAT School Day program as a foundational step toward ensuring that every student in the Commonwealth has the opportunity to pursue higher education and contribute to Virginia's continued prosperity.

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