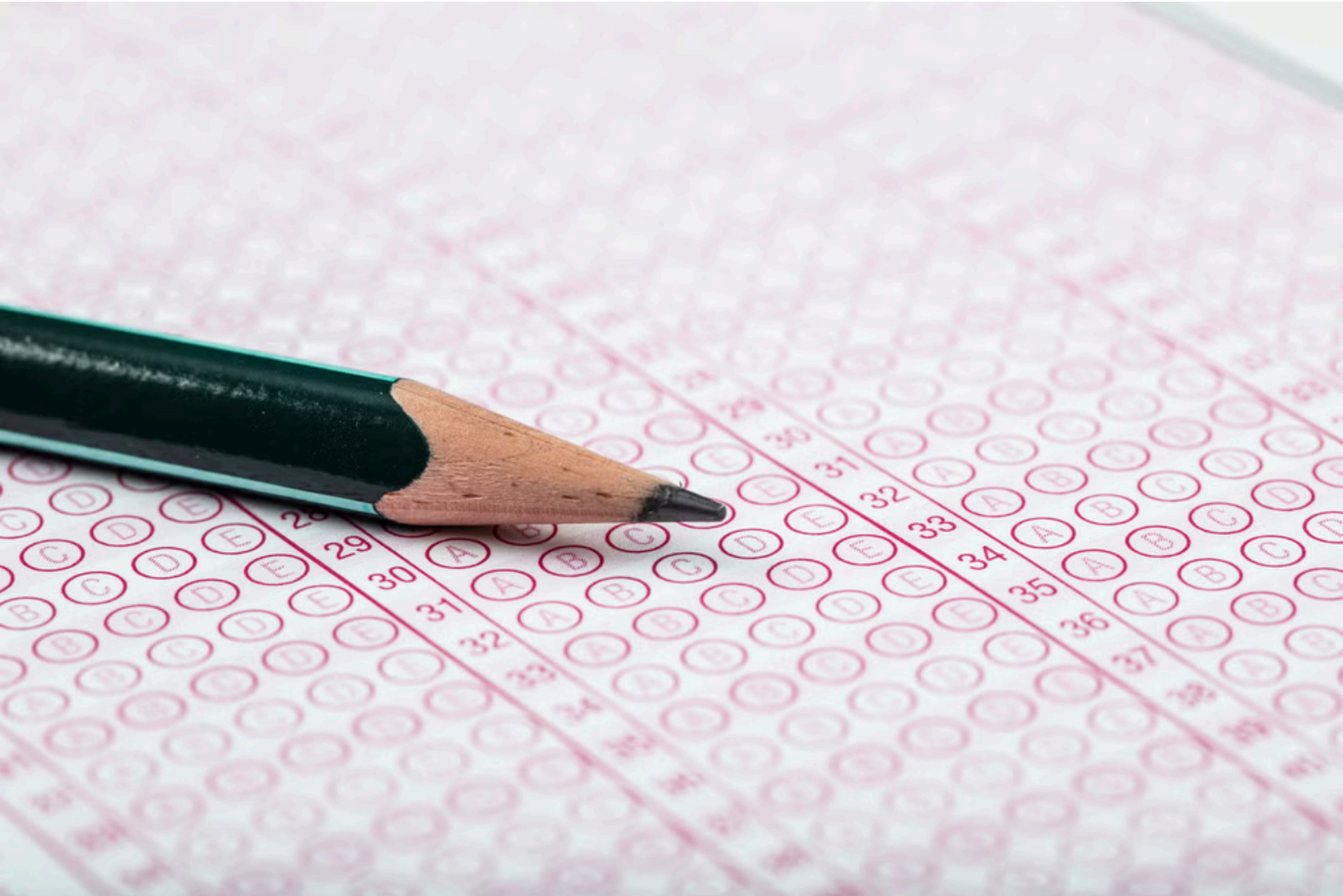


# TOWN&COUNTRY



## HAVE THE CULTURE WARS COME FOR STANDARDIZED TESTS? MEET THE NEW CONSERVATIVE SAT

The Classic Learning Test, a standardized college entrance exam that focuses on the Western Canon, has become popular in some Red States. Will it replace the SAT or ACT?

by Nicole Laporte

S

tarting this upcoming college admissions cycle, students applying to service academies such as West Point and the U.S. Naval Academy will be able to take a standardized test other than the SAT or ACT to be considered for admission.

Enter the CLT, or Classic Learning Test, a fill-the-bubble test whose English section is filled with passages from Virgil, John Stuart Mill, and other members of the Western canon meant to push a student a little harder in their analytical thinking—and knowledge of Classical texts, as well as Scripture—than the SAT and ACT do. Something else unique to the CLT: it can be taken at home, without a proctor, any time within a 12-hour window.

According to Jeremy Tate, the former schoolteacher and test prep company owner who launched the CLT in 2015, the test is “kind of the Rudy or Seabiscuit” going up against the double-headed Goliath of the SAT-ACT. Those tests, Tate said, have been in “a race to the bottom” for the last few decades. “The dumber test gets the market advantage,” he said, meaning that in the standardized testing world’s version of Coke versus Pepsi, consumers, i.e. students, choose to take either the SAT or ACT based on the one they think they’ll do better on. So the test that’s perceived to be easier wins.



MIKROMAN6 // GETTY IMAGES

The Roman poet Virgil, born in 70 BC.

“Anyone can see that,” Tate said, “I’ve got a copy of the 1980 SAT in our office and any eight-year-old could look at it and say, ‘Oh, wow, this is way harder than the current SAT where the longest reading passage is 120 words. Some of the reading passages are just 25 words, they’re just a short sentence.”

“If you’re just going to lay eyeballs on the two tests, it’s like, here’s 600 words of Shakespeare or John Locke (on the CLT) versus a passage about Taylor Swift (on the SAT). It’s dramatically different.”

One college advisor returned the swipe at the CLT: “I’m pretty sure that Aristotle would cry seeing his work reduced to 500-word excerpts with multiple-choice questions.”

## Red State Rise

However the ancient Greeks may feel about it, since 2023, when the CLT was accepted in Florida as an alternative to the ACT and SAT for students applying to state schools and scholarships, it vaulted from being a quirky test mostly taken by religious homeschoolers (Christian colleges were early adopters) into one that, while it is still dwarfed by the ACT and SAT in numbers, is seeing hockey-stick growth. In 2024, 190,194 students took the CLT, compared to 291 in 2016.

According to Tate, its popularity isn't just owed to more red states adopting it, such as Louisiana, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and North Carolina, and, most recently, the military academies—the latter development was championed by Secretary of War Pete Hegseth, who deemed the CLT “the gold standard” on X last year. In the nothing-is-ever-enough college admissions race, more students all over the country are submitting CLT scores as a kind of extra-credit accolade to differentiate themselves from other applicants, akin to “a book they got published or a patent,” Tate said.

“A lot of kids take the CLT and submit it to Harvard. Now, Harvard, not only do they not accept the CLT, they won't even have a conversation with us,” he said. “But kids have figured out that their 1550 (SAT score) isn't that special anymore.



VISIONSOFAMERICA/JOE SOHM // GETTY IMAGES

The U.S. Military Academy West Point now accepts CLT results.

“When I graduated high school about a dozen kids per year got a perfect SAT. Now it's 2,000 or 3,000. I was on an Ivy League campus about a month ago, we had a closed-door meeting. And they were very interested” in talking about the CLT. (To date, no Ivy has accepted it.)

The embrace of the CLT by conservatives has made it a political lightning rod, unleashing criticism from the left about the lack of diverse writers in its “author bank” and chalking the test up as yet another political tool being used to promote conservative ideology and de-“woke”-ify education in this country. That the test dovetails with Florida Governor Ron DeSantis’s classical education crusade only fuels the fire.

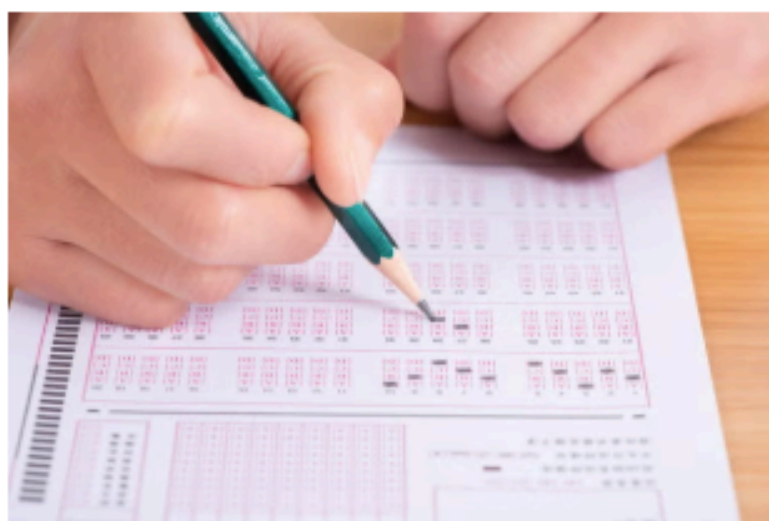
Tate argues that the CLT’s author bank is more varied than people think, as is his organization. Cornel West is on CLT’s Board of Academic Advisers, along with Angel Adams Parham, associate professor of sociology at the University of Virginia, whose research encompasses the historical and comparative-historical sociology of race. “One day, this is probably three years ago,” Tate said, “in the same hour, I’m at a top university and the dean actually raises her voice, she’s like, ‘the CLT doesn’t care about diverse voices. The CLT is pushing the Eurocentric ideology.’ And at the same time I’ve got another board member who’s all over me for greenlighting Toni Morrison onto our author bank. Like, ‘Is the CLT going woke?’ So we kind of feel like we make a move in any direction that may seem minor” and people erupt.

## Cheating Concerns

A less partisan criticism of the test is around its security, namely with its home-test version; it can also be taken with a proctor at test sites.

Skeptics say that kids can cheat by taking the test earlier in the day and then pass along (or sell) answers to students taking it later on. When Akil Bello, a test-prep expert, **took the test at home**, he clearly violated the test’s rule that the test-taking desk be clear of everything but a computer, scratch paper and a drink—and yet he wasn’t dinged. Bello concluded that the CLT is “a cheating scandal waiting to happen.”

The SAT and ACT have their own share of **cheating concerns** that Tate is happy to crow about. “The main reason the College Board went to this new, adaptive version of the test, where everyone gets a different test” was to curb cheating, he said. “That was their big thing. But then lo and behold, enter AI and it shocks the world. They release ChatGPT and kids can cheat in ways that were never imaginable.”



ZHIKUN SUN // GETTY IMAGES

Standardized test operators are looking for new ways to cheat-proof exams.

bar: clear, transparent evidence that it predicts college readiness and success. The SAT meets that bar. It's backed by decades of independent, peer-reviewed research showing its ability to predict first-year college performance, and it's trusted by higher education because it consistently meets rigorous standards for validity, reliability, security, and fairness.

According to the College Board, cheating affects only a fraction of 1 percent of its test scores.

In response to a question about the CLT's status as an alternative to the SAT, the company wrote in an email: “College entrance exams carry real consequences for students, so any test used for admissions, placement, or scholarships should meet a high

“States and colleges should expect that same level of evidence before using any alternative. To date, the CLT has not demonstrated it. Independent reviews and experts from the Iowa Board of Regents, the University of Nebraska’s Buros Center for Testing, and Arizona State University have raised consistent concerns about the CLT’s lack of evidence for predicting college success, as well as issues with score consistency, fairness, and its use in high-stakes decisions.”

Tate’s response?

“The SAT keeps releasing studies, white papers, psychometric jargon, and committees of experts explaining why it’s rigorous. Meanwhile, anybody with two functioning eyes can compare the actual tests and see the obvious: one asks students to wrestle with difficult texts, richer vocabulary, logic, philosophy, history, math without a device, and sustained reading comprehension, and the other increasingly resembles a gamified adaptive app designed to keep average students from feeling discouraged.

“If the modern SAT is truly the gold standard of academic rigor, then why does the CLT keep getting accused of being ‘too hard,’ ‘too classical,’ and ‘too content rich’ by the very people defending the SAT? You don’t need a 200-page report to recognize the difference between a filet mignon and a Lunchable.”

To address the security issue, the CLT has now partnered with Caveon, a leading test security company, and is devoting more resources to “lead on the test security side,” Tate said. “A number of ideas are on the table, one of which is to have a second camera positioned behind the student” in addition to having the student filmed by the video camera on their computer.

The company is also raising the price of its at-home exam starting on June 1, from \$69 to \$112. One reason for the price hike is to weed out “bad actors,” Tate said, by making the test cost-prohibitive and to encourage students to take the test with a proctor—the in-school test costs \$34.50.

He said that cheating cases rose once the test expanded beyond “a homeschool kid in Kansas taking a college entrance exam to go to the Bible college down the street. Their rates of cheating are just lower.”

“We’re seeing the highest percentage of students who are cheating right now are students who are using the CLT to try to hit a graduation requirement score in Florida.” (In Florida, high school students need to pass state English and math tests to receive a diploma. In their stead they can submit standardized test scores.)

“A lot of the things that standardized tests reveal are not PC to say, but we’ve just seen that in the numbers and the data,” Tate said. “So the higher price point will encourage more students to test in school, with a physical proctor right there with them.”

## Wider Adoption

Even with tightened security, Tate's main challenge is getting his test adopted by more schools—currently, there are about 300, most of which are smaller, religious institutions. “Unless it was widely accepted, I don't think we'd waste our time on it,” said one mother of a high schooler, who added that because her child is in contention for a National Merit Scholarship, “we're sticking with the SAT.”

Chris Teare, an independent college counselor based in Connecticut and Florida, said of the CLT: “As I learn more about it, the CLT strikes me as being—to borrow from Tolstoy—‘unhappy in its own way.’ All standardized tests have flaws of one type or another and are criticized accordingly. My Florida students—who are required to submit one standardized test or another—have not brought it up. I have not yet recommended the CLT because not one of my students is deep enough into studying the Classics for me to have suggested it.”

(Teare received an MA from St. John's College, known for its "Great Books" curriculum, and said he is "not a hater when it comes to studying Western Civilization. It's not the whole story students need, but it is foundational to understand certain aspects, and blindspots, of our culture.")

Jamie Beaton, founder of Crimson Education, was more blunt: "The Classic Learning Test is not currently a viable alternative to the SAT/ACT and of our 373 Ivy League offers this year, zero of them took this test. We would not recommend competitive applicants to take it at this stage because it is not yet viewed as a true peer to the more standard testing measures. It is better to achieve an excellent score in standardized tests that have broader recognition."



ABSTRACT AERIAL ART // GETTY IMAGES

CLT's founder, Jeremy Tate, hopes more schools will adopt the test.

because it is not yet viewed as a true peer to the more standard testing measures. It is better to achieve an excellent score in standardized tests that have broader recognition."

Others beg to differ. Jodi Furman, the founder of College Smart Start in Florida, **told Inside Higher Ed**, “Anecdotally, I’ve absolutely encouraged some students to take the CLT. There are some really great pros about it; it can be taken remotely... and it seemingly is offered way more often than either the SAT or ACT individually.”

Tate’s initial idea behind the CLT was to undo the marriage between classroom learning and the SAT, both of which have been bound up in the Common Core curriculum since the Obama era. (In 2016, the SAT was revised to align with Common Core standards.) He still stands by his vision.

“I think one of the very few ideas that almost everyone in education agrees on is that, for better or worse, the test inevitably drives curriculum. And so if you’ve got a test where students are reading Shakespeare, Dante—that’s going to drive what’s happening in the classroom as well. So that is our idea. You know what? What if there’s a college entrance exam that was encoring this other telos? This deeper telos of education as the cultivation of wisdom and virtue and the passing down of this great, intellectual inheritance?”

“That test didn’t exist. So the thought was: how hard could it be?”

**TOWN&COUNTRY**