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## Access to prep for SAT is urged

The Boston Globe

### Flaherty pushes providing free online programs

**By James Vaznis, Globe Staff | October 27, 2008**

With some parents spending thousands of dollars on SAT tutoring for their children, Boston City Council member Michael Flaherty aims to level the playing field for high school students by providing them access to free, online SAT preparatory programs.

Thousands of students in the city's public, parochial, and private high schools would be able to connect to the online program from the Boston Public Library's website, under legislation filed by Flaherty, for which a City Council hearing has been scheduled in December.

"You can use the program at the library, at school or at home - anywhere you can get your hands on a desktop or laptop computer," Flaherty said. "We have a responsibility to make sure that students of all income levels have a real chance to attend college, as educating our youth is the key to assuring Boston's future."

Tapping online resources has been a growing national trend in trying to close the achievement gap between students from affluent families and those from families with fewer resources. In Maine, where all students are required to take the Scholastic Assessment Test, the state in recent years has tapped two online programs to help shore up student skills on the exam's three sections: math, critical reading, and writing.

In Boston, the city's public school system is pushing to increase its combined average SAT scores by about 300 points to 1,650 by 2012. That goal exceeds this year's state average by 98 points. However, the state average has been rising.

Christopher Horan, a School Department spokesman, said of Flaherty's proposal, "We are always interested in finding new ways to prepare students for college, including online SAT prep programs."

Flaherty is working with the Boston Public Library on a one-year contract with the Chicago-based PrepMe LLC, which will cost \$45,000. Flaherty hopes to obtain a combination of city funds and private donations. The program promises to boost scores by "hundreds" of points, said Rick Bolton, PrepMe's executive vice president of academic relations. He said customers who pay a standard rate of \$299 have reported an average increase of 305 points. He said students should spend 3 to 5 hours a week during a four-month period answering questions on the program.

Boston tested the online program last year, issuing 500 identification numbers for students at three high schools: Community Academy of Science and Health in Hyde Park, Excel Academy in South Boston, and Academy of Public Service in Dorchester. Flaherty had no data on how students subsequently performed on the SAT.

The city's latest effort to boost SAT scores comes as a growing number of colleges nationwide are dropping the test as an admission requirement or making the exam optional. The move is in response to criticism that the exam is not always the best predictor of college success.

Greg Johnson, executive director of Bottom Line Inc., a Jamaica Plain nonprofit that helps high school students with the college admission process, said he believes too much emphasis is placed on increasing SAT scores.

"Even if you raise an SAT score by 200, you might not get into a better college," said Johnson, emphasizing that a student's grade point average and course rigor carry more sway in college admission.

"The reality is there's only a handful of kids who are on the cusp of getting into a better college," said Johnson, who previously worked at the Princeton Review for six years. "The most competitive kids are getting into the most competitive schools, and the average kids are getting into average colleges."

But at least one student Johnson works with is convinced that a higher SAT score carries clout. Christina Alexander 17, of Roxbury, said she plans to retake the SAT this fall and that she wished she had access to an online SAT prep program at home.

"The SAT is not really that hard. It's basic stuff, but there are a lot of tricks and back doors to questions," said Alexander, a senior at Health Careers Academy in the Fenway. "If you figure out how the test works, then you're OK."

And that, she said, requires a lot of practice.

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