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Bring a No. 2 pencil and a checkbook

■ Some LI families are shelling out top dollar to hire tutors for the college-bound in the quest for a high score

BY NEDRA RHONE
STAFF WRITER

Michael Fikar offers something that many high-striving Long Island students and their parents can't refuse — "the possibility of scoring a perfect 1600 on the SAT."

As director of SAT 1600, a tutoring service based in Manhasset, Fikar posts images of his own 1600 SAT score reports on the company Web site. He hires staff members who also have earned perfect scores. And his students go on to the most selective colleges — Harvard and Stanford and Dartmouth to name a few.

All that success comes with a price. Fikar charges \$500 per hour and up, and many of his students begin sweating toward a perfect score in the 10th grade.

"What makes us unique is the willingness of myself and my staff to share our thought processes, to literally micromanage the way our students process and answer questions on tests, based on our own experience in preparing for, and achieving perfect scores on the standardized tests that we teach," Fikar writes on his Web site.

Private tutors, employed early and often, particularly to help boost SAT scores, are the rock stars of the educational

realm, according to some educators. Since the late 1980s, the popularity of tutors has grown, they said, fueled in part by the desire of students and their parents to gain entry into the nation's top universities.

Last week, news of Richard Andres, the tutor charged with copyright infringement for providing copies of an unreleased SAT test to individuals in the Great Neck, Jericho and Roslyn school districts, called attention to what some say is an industry gone wild.

"I think what we have here on Long Island more than anywhere is an obsession with the SAT scores, [but] you are actually seeing the elite universities moving away from the SAT and looking more for . . . well-rounded people," said Michael Hogan, associate dean of the School of Education at Long Island University's C.W. Post Campus in Brookville.

A perfect 1600 SAT score is

not the sole determinant of success, he said. Still, tutors with even a single perfect scorer as a past client may find themselves turning new students away. In some of the more competitive school districts, where parents may have the means to pay for assistance, they said tutors have charged as much as \$750 per hour.

Kyle Carone waited three years for his tutor. He had the foresight to put his name on the waiting list when he was still in eighth grade. This year, when the SATs rolled around, he was one of three students at Northport High School who scored face time with a very in-demand 15-year tutoring veteran.

"The whole tutoring thing is so part of high school," said Carone, 17. "It's almost amazing that everyone is able to find a tutor."

Rather than acquire a private tutor to be flaunted like the Kate Spade handbags she and her friends once coveted, Monique Yashaya, 16, of Roslyn, followed her parents' suggestion and opted for a less pricey Princeton Review course. "We have the idea that the more money something is the better quality it is going to be," Yashaya said. "It's not like you get a tutor because you need one," she said. "It's almost as though you have to have one. It's like an accessory."

See TUTOR on A42

Price of SATs

TUTOR from A2

tests and free extra help guarantee a 100-point score increase, said Amy Dundon, executive director of the Princeton Review of Long Island. The course costs \$999 for 35 hours of instruction and four practice tests.

But Dundon adds that they also offer free two-hour strategy sessions, where students learn test-taking tips.

For one-on-one attention, most students choose the company's private tutoring, which ranges from \$2,000 to \$5,400 for 18 hours, depending on the tutor's experience. "I know that I can provide individualized attention," said Webb Garrison, a tutor for Princeton Review. "It's lucrative, and it is something that I am good at," he said.

Affordable choices

Joyce Granville, the parent of a junior at Jericho High School, was pleased when she found a tutor for \$50 an hour to coach her daughter for the March 27 SAT.

Her daughter also took advantage of Princeton Review's free sessions. "I felt I needed one because, just in Jericho, the competition is really high, and I felt I would have been lost," said Granville's 17-year-old daughter, who did not want her name used. "I don't know anyone who didn't have a private tutor."

Students searching for a perfect match with a tutor rely mostly on word of mouth, and the pool of tutors is as diverse as the students seeking them.

Andres, for example, was a well-known tutor at Jericho High School, where he taught math for more than 30 years. He authored a popular SAT prep handbook, and when he retired in 1999, he offered tutoring at rates up to \$200 per hour.

At the other end of the spectrum is Hooman Dilmanian. The tutor based in Great Neck is a 1999 Cornell University graduate with a bachelor's degree in chemistry. He said he got into the business by accident. "I was just looking for a second business or a second income," Dilmanian said.

A friend suggested he work with the test prep centers, but Dilmanian found he could earn more on his own. He has been tutoring for about two years and serves 10 to 15 students at less than \$75 per hour, he said.

Virtually anyone can decide to become a tutor and the claims that some make of boosting students' SAT scores may be misleading, critics said. Parents who

want their children to have every possible advantage may be seduced into signing up, even if they don't always have the bank account to pay for it.

"We think that any kind of test familiarization is helpful and should be done," said Chiara Coletti, spokeswoman for the College Board, the SAT sponsor. "On the other hand, the proliferation of commercial-coaching courses and high-priced tutors is a bit alarming to us."

Results vary

Families should be wary of "wild and wanton" score-improvement claims, Coletti said. Research conducted by the College Board concluded that coached students have slightly higher score increases than uncoached students on the SAT I, but the gains are smaller than

those advertised by national test preparation firms and some private tutors. A study published by the organization in 1999 showed that coached students had a 29-point gain in verbal scores compared with a 21-point gain for uncoached students. In math, the gains

were 40 points and 22 points respectively for coached and uncoached students.

Each time a student takes the SAT, up to three times, he may see score gains from 25 to 30 points, Coletti said. A number of factors contribute to that, she said, including increased familiarity with the test or the fact students have simply had several more months of learning.

Coaches said years of observing their students make significant increases after tutoring can't be disregarded. "I've spent seven years involved with Princeton Review watching unbelievable score increases happen to students that could in no way be the result of three to six months of maturing," Dundon said.

Fikar said a score in the 1450s doesn't guarantee entry into the best schools. Then, of course, neither does a perfect 1600.

"We know admissions departments very, very well," Coletti said, "and they look at a wide range of measures."

Even as some students accept this, many are reluctant to take chances. "I didn't really feel like I needed it [tutoring]," said Carone, who scored a 1440 recently. "But I felt like I needed something more guided."

He continues meeting with the tutor he waited three years for, and he will retake the SAT I in May, hoping that this time he will score 1500.



Kyle Carone of Northport

PHOTO BY JOEL CAIRO