



POLICY REPORT

South Carolina Policy Council

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An Analysis of 2010 SAT Scores: Part I

As education policy makers across the state await the release of the 2010 SAT scores, it's worth reviewing how South Carolina fared on the 2009 SAT. In Part I of this report, we'll do that, with special attention paid to the following:

- SAT performance as compared to other southeastern states
- Economic and ethnic achievement gaps
- SAT performance of South Carolina's best students compared to their peers in other southeastern states

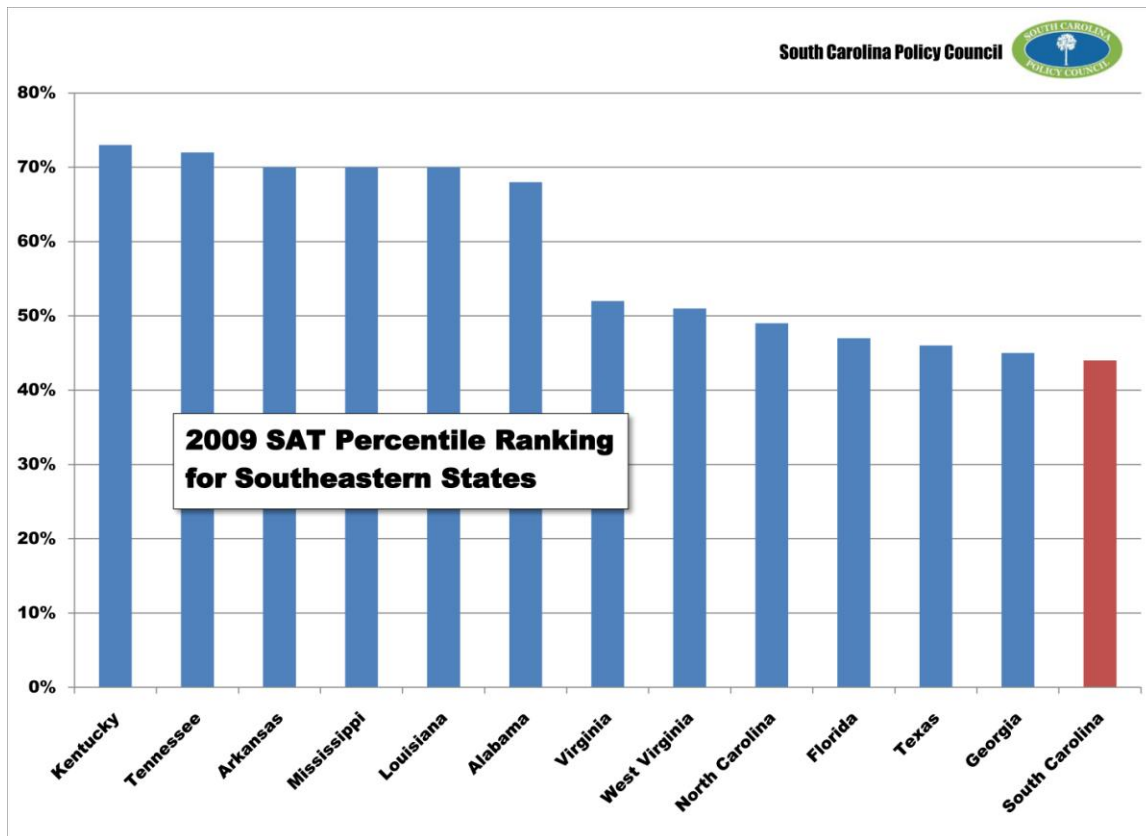
Part II of this report will be posted next week, immediately following the official release of the [2010 scores by the College Board](#).

Lowest in the South

[As noted in our previous report](#), South Carolina student performance on the 2009 SAT dropped by 9 points to a lowest-in-the-South average score of 1452, corresponding to the 44th percentile.¹ Among the three testing sections, South Carolina students performed best in mathematics, earning an average score of 496; and worst in writing, with an average score of 470. In critical reading, South Carolina students scored an average of 496. The average scores of all three sections declined as compared to 2008. Writing fell by 6 points. Critical reading dropped by 2 points and mathematics by a point.

South Carolina's average composite score of 1452 was the lowest among the 13 southeastern states. Kentucky had the highest average composite score in the Southeast: 1707, which corresponds to the 73rd percentile. The chart below translates the average score of all 13 states into percentile rank. Eight of thirteen states had average scaled scores higher than the 50 percentile ranking—that is, higher than the national average. The other five, including South Carolina, were below the national average.

¹The rank is the percentage of students whose scores fall below a particular scaled score. For example, a score in the 44th percentile indicates the student fared better than 44 percent of all students who took the same SAT.



Achievement Gaps

The gap between low-income and high-income students continued to expand in 2009. Students from households earning more than \$200,000 had an average score of 1633, up 35 points from last year. Students from households earning between \$0 and \$20,000 scored an average of 1258, 248 points below the national average. In total, the gap between South Carolina’s wealthiest and poorest households was 375 points.

When the scaled score is translated into the percentile spread, the achievement gap is even more striking. Students from the highest-earning households scored in the 65th percentile while students from the lowest-earning households scored in the 22nd percentile. This means the average poorest South Carolina student outperformed only 22 out of 100 students nationwide who took the same SAT exam.

While students from the highest-earning households and lowest-earning households saw an increase in their SAT scores, students in other middle-income groups—between \$20,000 to \$40,000; \$40,000 to \$60,000; and \$60,000 to \$80,000—all experienced a drop in their average composite score as compared to 2008.

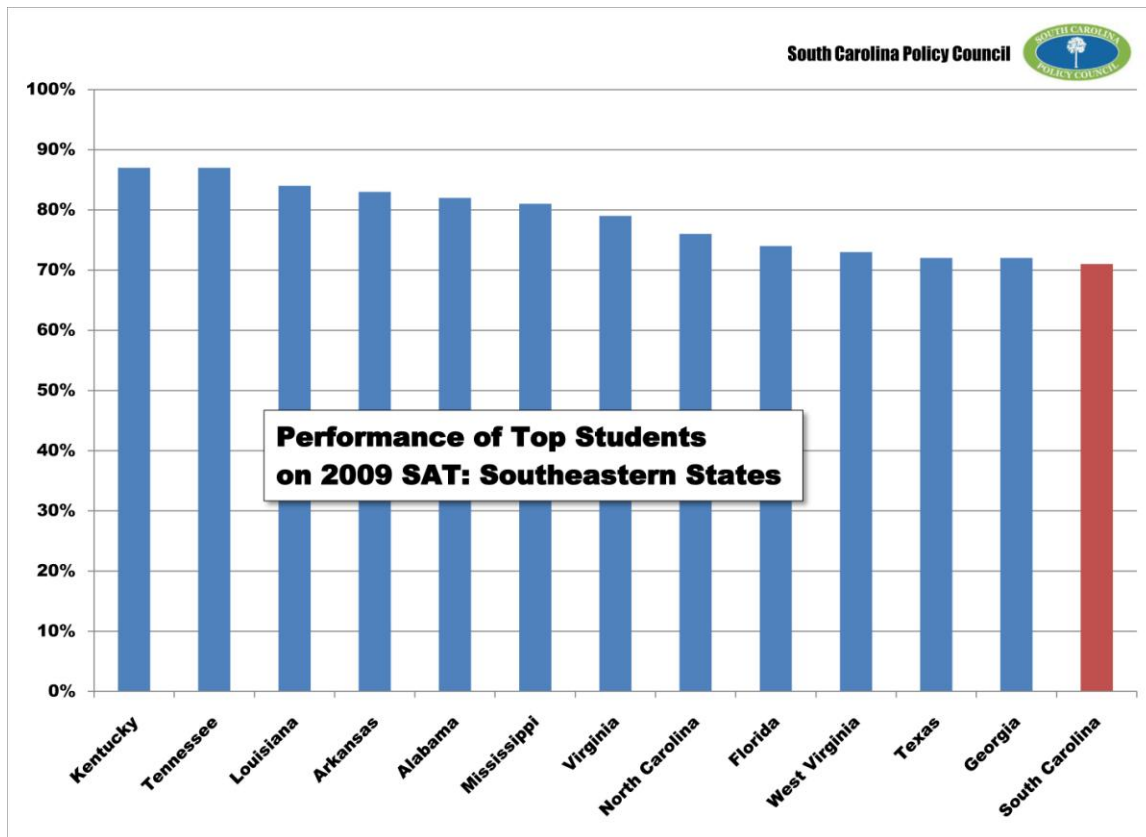
Achievement gaps between ethnic groups also continued to grow in 2009. The gap between African-American and white students in South Carolina grew by 4 points from 2008 to 2009. African-American test scores declined by 10 points—from 1250 to 1240.

Writing scores dropped by 7 points from 409 to 402. By comparison, scores for white students declined by only 6 points from 1542 to 1536. The result was a 296 point gap between the state’s two largest ethnic groups.

South Carolina’s Best Students Would Be Average in Other States

As we’ve written before, [South Carolina’s top students](#) do not compare favorably to their peers in other states. The 2009 SAT scores illustrate this point very clearly. South Carolina students in the top 10 percent of their class scored an average composite of 1692, placing them in the 71st percentile nationwide. By comparison, Kentucky’s “top 10 percent” students scored an average composite of 1879, placing them in the 87th percentile.

As the chart below indicates, South Carolina’s best students ranked last in the SAT when compared to their peers in other southeastern states.



In fact, South Carolina’s best students, on average, scored worse than the average student in two neighboring states: Kentucky and Tennessee. Kentucky’s and Tennessee’s average composite percentile ranking was 73 percent and 72 percent, respectively. This means South Carolina’s top 10 percent students, who scored in the 71st percentile, performed *worse* than the average of all SAT test takers from Kentucky and Tennessee. South Carolina’s second-best students, those ranking between the 10th and 20th percentile in their class, scored an average composite of 1493, placing them in the 49th percentile.

This means South Carolina’s second-best, or above average, students performed at just below the national average.

Likewise, South Carolina students identified as average—that is, between the 20th and 40th percentile in their class rank—ranked lowest in the Southeast. Their average composite score was 1397, placing them in the 37th percentile. Comparable students in six other Southeast states—Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama—scored above the 50th percentile.

The table below indicates how students in the top 10 percent, 20 percent, and 40 percent of their class compared to their peers in other Southeastern states. South Carolina was dead last in every category.

	State Overall		Highest Tenth		Second Tenth		Second Fifth		Final Three Fifth	
	Scaled Score	Percent Rank	Scaled Score	Percent Rank	Scaled Score	Percent Rank	Scaled Score	Percent Rank	Scaled Score	Percent Rank
Kentucky	1707	73	1879	87	1668	69	1581	59	1471	46
Tennessee	1701	72	1877	87	1666	69	1555	57	1463	45
Arkansas	1684	70	1837	84	1638	66	1552	56	1436	42
Mississippi	1680	70	1822	83	1621	64	1534	53	1403	37
Louisiana	1676	70	1809	82	1620	64	1512	51	1380	35
Alabama	1658	68	1801	81	1611	63	1507	51	1378	35
Virginia	1521	52	1773	79	1552	56	1445	44	1316	28
West Virginia	1511	51	1737	76	1544	55	1436	42	1315	28
North Carolina	1486	49	1720	74	1524	52	1433	41	1310	27
Florida	1475	47	1707	73	1515	52	1426	41	1308	27
Texas	1467	46	1702	72	1508	51	1423	40	1297	26
Georgia	1460	45	1700	72	1498	50	1404	37	1275	24
South Carolina	1452	44	1692	71	1493	49	1397	37	1274	23

Finally, it’s worth noting that no one public school district is immune to these trends. Looking at the 2009 SAT data from South Carolina’s 85 school districts, we find that 35 out of 85 school districts made gains from 2008 while 49 districts saw declines.

Anderson 3 had the highest composite score in 2009—1620, placing it in the 64th percentile. However, Anderson 3 only had seven test takers. Among the districts that had at least 100 test takers, York District 4-Fort Mill scored the highest at 1586, corresponding to the 61st percentile. Marion 1 had the highest significant gain, jumping 150 points from 1303 to 1453.

Yet consider that when compared to other Southeast states, Anderson 3 still scored lower than the average composite score in six other states: Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama.

Part II of this series, which will be released next week, looks at the 2010 results, providing additional research on how the scores compare to 2009. We will also look at the 2010 scores within a historical context, based on data from the past five to ten years.

*Nothing in the foregoing should be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder passage of any legislation.
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