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TOP OF THE TIMES

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Purchase of SAT Questions Barred

□ The college admission exam's owner obtains a restraining order against a firm that encouraged students to remove test materials.

By Rebecca Trounson, Times Staff Writer

In yet another indication of the high-pressure atmosphere surrounding college admissions, the owner of the SAT has taken court action to stop a Santa Monica-based company from allegedly encouraging students to steal and then sell it copies of the college entrance exam.

The College Board, the New York-based nonprofit that owns the test, was granted a temporary restraining order in federal court in Los Angeles Friday against a company identified as Harvard Advantage; other alleged affiliates, known as TestMaterials and WC Films; and two people who apparently are associated with the businesses, Sergio Camacho and Elizabeth Ulrich.

College Board spokeswoman Chiara Coletti, citing ongoing legal action, declined to speculate about the motives behind the companies' recent solicitations to students. Some high school counselors and officials in the testing industry suggested that the most likely goals were to sell test copies as practice sheets to potential test takers or to use them in offering prep classes.

Coletti and a spokesman for the Educational Testing Service, which administers the SAT for the College Board, said they could not remember a similar incident or court case. "The typical test security case involves one student copying off another but nothing like this, not in my memory," said ETS spokesman Thomas Ewing, who has worked at the testing service for more than two decades.

The College Board was alerted by several high school counselors around the country, who said they had recently received faxes encouraging them to tell students the company was offering to pay for test booklets, according to Coletti.

Similar solicitations from TestMaterials on several admissions-related websites offered students \$25 — or a \$50 donation to a charity of choice — if they would send in their question booklets instead of returning them, along with their answer sheets, to monitors as required at the end of the nearly four-hour exam. It costs \$41.50 to take the test.

Saying it was affiliated with a group studying differences in SAT tests given in separate regions, the solicitation from the company urged students to help. "Easy, huh? Yeah, we think so," read the posting on one website. "If you have a test ... and you'd like to BE PAID FOR IT ... you've come to the right place."

A man contacted at a Santa Monica telephone number listed in state business filings for Harvard Advantage said he was not Camacho, did not know how to contact him and had no connection to the company. Ulrich could not be reached.

Officials at the College Board, along with high school counselors, said they had not previously heard of any of the companies or people named in the court order.

The court action was filed on the eve of last Saturday's administration of the SAT, one of about

half a dozen times the test is offered each year to thousands of high school students. This year's test takers may be especially nervous because they are among the first to take a revised, longer version of the SAT with a new essay portion. But Coletti said about 547,000 students sat for the exam Saturday, with no major problems reported.

"We had a smattering of incidents Saturday, but nothing out of the ordinary — someone with a cheat sheet, someone who asks to go to the bathroom with a cellphone in the middle of the test — but no indication of anything related to this," the spokeswoman said. "The feeling is that ... we managed to prevent whatever these people were trying to do."

SAT tests, at least those in current use, are copyrighted materials and are closely held by the College Board and ETS. Ewing said the exam booklets are counted after testing, and there is an investigation any time one goes missing. "We know how many we hand out and how many are handed back," he said. "We track it very carefully."

He and others said that test administrators are always on the lookout for people or firms seeking to profit by giving students an unfair advantage on the test.

Identical tests are not offered every time, but some questions are repeated during the testing season, officials have said.

Linda Conti, director of college guidance at Oaks Christian School in Westlake Village and past president of the Western Assn. for College Admission Counseling, said she was not aware of any Southern California counselors having received requests from the Santa Monica company. She said she was pleased that the College Board had obtained the temporary restraining order.

"It's quite underhanded," she said of the solicitations. "I guess anyone who would do this feels it gives them an edge, a marketing tool they can use."

Coletti, the College Board spokeswoman, said schools in Virginia and Florida first contacted the test-maker last week, and it then sent an e-mail to counselors urging them to be wary during Saturday's testing. "If you are a test center supervisor, please be extra vigilant to be sure test takers do not attempt to take test booklets," the e-mail said.

The board also launched an investigation and on Friday filed its motion for a temporary restraining order.

Granted the same day by U.S. District Judge Florence-Marie Cooper, the order notes that the College Board holds a copyright on the SAT and enjoins the defendants from copying or disseminating any tests or questions already received and from "encouraging any person to violate any rule of any College Board test administration."

The judge ordered the defendants to file papers by next week to show any reason the College Board should not be given a preliminary injunction in the case and ordered them to appear for a hearing Oct. 24.

About 2.3 million students a year take the SAT, with many taking it more than once in hopes of improving their scores. There is a growing number of firms offering classes on strategies for how to tackle the mainly multiple-choice exam and, recently, its 25-minute essay portion, which debuted in March. Princeton Review, Kaplan Test Prep and Ivy West are among better-known and respected organizations behind such courses.

Older SAT tests are often packaged and sold by the College Board. Test-preparation companies frequently have their employees take the tests to get a sense of the questions, especially on any new version; but those actions are not considered violations of copyright rules.

TASKS:

- 1) Summarize the text; what are the main arguments? (not more than 120 words)
- 2) Write a discussion titled «Cheating at school»; What is your opinion on the topic?