

# Opt-Outs: What Is Lost When Students Do Not Test

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Scores on annual statewide achievement tests can provide parents, students, educators, and policymakers with valuable information—but only if students participate. This issue brief provides background about recent increases in (and efforts to expand) the number of students opting out of statewide assessments, describes the information and data quality lost when students do not participate in statewide annual testing, and offers recommendations for reducing opt-outs and their negative effects.

## Background

The majority of the general public do not support testing opt-outs. A poll conducted in 2015 by *Education Next* found that 59% of the general public, and 52% of parents, opposed letting parents decide whether to have their children take state math and reading tests.<sup>1</sup> A similar 2015 poll by Phi Delta Kappa and Gallup found that 59% of public school parents would not excuse their own child from taking standardized tests.<sup>2</sup> However, in the 2014–2015 school year, groups of parents throughout the United States opted their students out of testing. In New York State, 20 percent of students opted out of statewide testing this year,<sup>3</sup> and in Washington State, more than one-fourth

of high school juniors refused to participate<sup>4</sup>—which caused participation rates to fall far below the federally required 95 percent. Additionally, significant numbers of parents in Colorado, Florida, Oregon, Maine, Michigan, New Jersey, and New Mexico opted their students out of statewide testing this past year.<sup>5</sup>

Parents have cited a number of reasons for opting their children out. The New York parents' group United to Counter the Core cites concerns about testing, curriculum, and the direction of the state Department of Education as reasons to opt out.<sup>6</sup> Regarding testing itself, parents elsewhere have reported concern about the types of tests administered, the length and number of tests, and the administration modes.<sup>7</sup>

A majority of states (34) require all students to participate in state testing,<sup>8</sup> but that could be changing. In the last year, both federal and state legislative bodies have introduced bills related to opt-outs. In both the US Senate and the US House of Representatives, amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) were proposed that would allow parents to opt their children out of testing but would not penalize the school for accountability purposes.<sup>9</sup>

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The House amendment passed, while the Senate amendment was rejected.<sup>10</sup> In the states, Oregon passed legislation requiring the state department of education to provide information to parents about their ability to opt their children out of testing.<sup>11</sup> The Maine legislature passed a similar law, but it was vetoed by the governor.<sup>12</sup> Organizations such as the National Education Association (NEA) are interested in engaging with parents and families to support a national opt-out movement, making it likely that states will continue to introduce such legislation.<sup>13</sup>

### **Why Does This Information Matter?**

The potential increase in the number of states permitting opt-outs is important because when students do not participate in annual statewide testing, parents, students, educators, and policymakers lose information used to improve classroom instruction, measure the performance of students, classes, schools, or districts, and strengthen research and program evaluation. Opt-outs also threaten the overall accuracy—and therefore the usefulness—of the data provided.

### **Information to Improve Classroom Instruction**

Statewide test scores are one of the most readily available forms of data used by educators to help inform instruction. Individual student data can be used to identify general strengths and weaknesses, and can identify students who may need additional support.<sup>14</sup> When aggregated to a specific group, class, grade, school, or district, achievement data can help in guiding instruction or to tailor curriculum.<sup>15</sup> It can also be used in setting goals for students' annual performance.<sup>16</sup>

### **Accuracy of Data**

Of course, student assessment data is useful only if it is accurate. When large numbers of students opt out of testing, the meaning of group-level scores may become distorted, particularly if the opt-outs are concentrated in particular student populations. For example, in New York State, most students who opted out attended primarily white, middle- and upper-middle class districts in Long Island.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the New York Commissioner of Education indicated that in some cases, teachers may have been calling parents of low-scoring students asking them to keep their children home during testing.<sup>18</sup> The concentration of opt-outs in particular demographic groups would provide misleading information to the public about overall student performance.

### **Information about Student Performance**

Statewide test scores allow parents and educators to see how students measure up to statewide academic standards intended for all students in the state, something they cannot get from grades based on specific classroom curriculum. While grades are important, they can also be influenced by a variety of factors unrelated to student achievement, such as grade inflation,<sup>19</sup> noncognitive factors separate from achievement (such as attendance and timely completion of assignments),<sup>20</sup> unintentional bias,<sup>21</sup> or unawareness of performance expectations in subsequent grades (e.g., what it means to be prepared for college).<sup>22</sup> For this reason, grades are an insufficient means of understanding a student's academic achievement in a more objective context. In contrast, statewide assessments test student proficiency relative to content and performance standards that apply to all students in the state, and can provide information about a student's, school's, or district's standing compared to others in the state (or across states, if the assessment is used by more than one).

### **Information about School Quality**

Statewide assessment data enables better transparency and monitoring of how effective

schools are in their mission of educating students. One specific benefit of statewide data is the ability to examine and compare how schools are doing in educating certain groups of students. In 2015, a group of more than 25 civil rights or education groups released a statement requesting that the expected reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) require targets for closing achievement gaps for all students, including “each major racial and ethnic group, students with disabilities, English language learners, and students from low-income families.”<sup>23</sup> Without accurate data about the academic achievement of each of these student groups, it would be impossible to determine whether all students are progressing, or identify schools or districts that have promising practices with certain student groups. Another benefit with increased transparency is that the data gives parents an indicator of school quality that can help in selecting a school for their children.<sup>24</sup>

### **Information for Research and Program Evaluation**

Countless efforts to improve schools and education quality have been undertaken over the years, ranging from curricular reforms to alternative teacher pathways.<sup>25</sup> To evaluate the effectiveness of a particular improvement program, statewide test scores

are often used because they are available annually and in most grades. For example, in an evaluation of the effectiveness of the teacher Talent Transfer Initiative, which provided incentives to a district's highest-performing teachers to move to and stay in its low-performing schools for at least two years, researchers found that the initiative helped raise elementary math and reading scores by four to ten percentile points.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, a study of state high school graduation requirements found that increasing the number of math and science courses required for graduation did not have an effect on student achievement.<sup>27</sup> Student assessment data allows for rigorous examination of programs and policies to ensure that resources are allocated towards what works.

## Recommendations

Student achievement data gathered from annual statewide assessments can also provide information for educators, the public (including students and their parents), and researchers. When large numbers of students do not take these assessments, the amount, accuracy, and usefulness of the data that

can be gained from the tests are threatened. The following recommendations are intended to help school districts, educators, and policymakers maintain this valuable information.

1. **Districts should reduce unnecessary testing.** Examine all student assessment requirements to ensure that each provides useful information. If an assessment does not provide unique or useful information, eliminate the assessment.
2. **Educators and policymakers should improve communication with parents about the value gained from having all students take the assessments.** Provide parents with information about the types of assessments administered, the reasons for the assessments, and the information gained from the assessments. Policymakers should provide parents an opportunity to voice any concerns about the tests administered.<sup>28</sup>
3. **Policymakers should discourage opting out.** Wherever possible, require students to participate in statewide

assessments. States that allow opt-outs should avoid creating laws, policies, or communications that suggest an endorsement of the practice.

4. **Policymakers should support appropriate uses of test scores.** Much of the recent controversy over test scores is related to their potential use as an accountability measure. Test results are an important indicator of student achievement, but they are—and should be—only one of several such indicators. Additionally, the use of test scores should not be limited to accountability metrics. Policymakers should publicize and support programs that facilitate the appropriate use of test scores for instruction, such as funding professional development and requiring teacher preparation programs to provide training in the appropriate interpretation and use of assessments.<sup>29</sup> Policies should also encourage the use of assessment data for research, both through funding and, where applicable, explicit legislative language enabling such use.

## Notes

- 1 The question asked was: "Do you support or oppose letting parents decide whether to have their children take state math and reading tests?" Michael B. Henderson, Paul E. Peterson, & Martin R. West, "The 2015 EdNext Poll on School Reform," *Education Next* 16 (2016).
- 2 The question asked was: "Would you excuse your own child from taking one or more standardized tests?" PDK/Gallup Poll, "Testing Lacks Public Support" (2015), [pdkpoll2015.pdkintl.org/236](http://pdkpoll2015.pdkintl.org/236). Interestingly, African American and Hispanic respondents (75% and 65%, respectively) were more likely than white respondents (54%) to say that they would not excuse their child from testing.
- 3 New York State Education Department, "State Education Department Releases Spring 2015 Grades 3–8 Assessment Results" (August 12, 2015).
- 4 Andrew Ujifusa, "Smarter Balanced Opt-Out Rates Top 25 Percent for Washington State 11th Graders," *Education Week*, July 9, 2015.
- 5 Anya Kamenetz, "Anti-Test 'Opt-Out' Movement Makes a Wave in New York State," *NPR Morning Edition*, April 20, 2015.
- 6 Elizabeth A. Harris, "20% of New York State Students Opted Out of Standardized Tests This Year," *New York Times*, August 12, 2015.
- 7 Leah Todd, "Study: More Testing Refusals in Wealthy Districts," *Seattle Times*, July 2, 2015.
- 8 Only three states—California, Colorado, and, starting in January 2016, Oregon—allow students to opt out without consequences, while an additional five—Maine, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Nebraska, and Washington—allow refusals but do not exempt students from potential consequences. Sarah-Jane Lorenzo, "Opt Out Policies by State," *Policy Update* 22 (National Association of State Boards of Education, August 2015).
- 9 Lauren Camera, "Day One of Senate ESEA Debate: Rift Over Accountability Grows," *Education Week*, July 7, 2015; Lauren Camera, "Senate Rebuffs ESEA Amendment to Let States Opt Out of Federal Accountability," *Education Week*, July 9, 2015; Alyson Klein,

- "House Could Vote on Parent's Right to Opt Out of Tests Under ESEA," *Education Week*, July 6, 2015.
- 10 As of the writing of this paper, the bill had not gone through the conference process. See Lauren Camera, *Senate Passes ESEA Rewrite with Big Bipartisan Backing*, 81-17, EDUC. WEEK (July 16, 2015), available at [blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2015/07/senate\\_passes\\_esea\\_rewrite\\_wit.html](https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2015/07/senate_passes_esea_rewrite_wit.html).
- 11 Oregon, H.B. 2655
- 12 Maine H.P. 471
- 13 Stephen Sawchuk, "NEA to Support Opt-Out, Oppose Common-Core Testing" *Education Week*, July 7, 2015.
- 14 Center for Assessment, *Using Baseline Data and Information to Set SLO Targets* (Center for Assessment, 2013), [www.nciea.org/wp-content/uploads/7\\_Using-Baseline-Data-and-Information\\_7.15.13.pdf](http://www.nciea.org/wp-content/uploads/7_Using-Baseline-Data-and-Information_7.15.13.pdf).
- 15 Kerri A. Kerr, Julie A. Marsh, Gina Schuyler Ikemoto, Hilary Darilek, & Heather Barney, "Strategies to Promote Data Use for Instructional Improvement: Actions, Outcomes, and Lessons from Three Urban Districts," *American Journal of Education* 112 (2006): 496–520; Kim Schildkamp and Wilmad Kuiper, "Data-Informed Curriculum Reform: Which Data, What Purposes, and Promoting and Hindering Factors," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 26, no. 3 (2010): 482–496.
- 16 Center for Assessment, *Using Baseline Data*.
- 17 Matthew M. Chingos, "Who Opt's Out of State Tests?" *The Brown Center Chalkboard* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2015).
- 18 Keshia Clukey, "Education Commissioner Begins Plan to Combat Opt Outs" (*Politico*, August 26, 2015).
- 19 Grades can be subject to grade inflation where grades are increased without an increase in student achievement. ACT research found an increase in high school GPA of 12.5 percent between 1991 and 2003, meaning that parents may not be given an accurate depiction of student performance. ACT, *Are High School Grades Inflated?* (Iowa City, IA, 2005), [www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/issues.pdf](http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/issues.pdf).
- 20 Elaine M. Allensworth, Julia A. Gwynne, Paul Moore, & Marisa de la Torre, *Looking Forward to High School and College: Middle Grade Indicators of Readiness in Chicago Public Schools* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2014), [ccsr.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Middle\\_Grades\\_Report.pdf](http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Middle_Grades_Report.pdf).
- 21 A recent study in Israel following students from sixth grade to high school found that teachers overestimated boys' abilities and underestimated girls' abilities in math and science when grading assignments. Victor Lavy & Edith Sand, "On the Origins of Gender Human Capital Gaps: Short and Long Term Consequences of Teachers' Stereotypical Biases," (NBER Working Paper No. 20909) (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2015), [www.nber.org/papers/w20909](http://www.nber.org/papers/w20909).
- 22 For example, the 2012 ACT National Curriculum Survey® found a large gap between how high school teachers perceive the college readiness of high school graduates and how college instructors perceive the readiness of their first-year students. ACT, *ACT National Curriculum Survey 2012: Policy Implications on Preparing for Higher Standards* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, Inc., 2013), [www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/NCS-PolicySummary2012.pdf](http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/NCS-PolicySummary2012.pdf).
- 23 Education Trust, "More than 25 Civil Rights Groups and Education Advocates Release Principles for ESEA Reauthorization: 'The Federal Role Must Be Honored and Maintained,'" [edtrust.org/press\\_release/more-than-20-civil-rights-groups-and-education-advocates-release-principles-for-esea-reauthorization-the-federal-role-must-be-honored-and-maintained/](http://edtrust.org/press_release/more-than-20-civil-rights-groups-and-education-advocates-release-principles-for-esea-reauthorization-the-federal-role-must-be-honored-and-maintained/).
- 24 Providing test score information to lower-income families participating in a public school choice plan increases the likelihood that parents will choose a nearby school with higher test scores. Justine S. Hastings & Jeffrey M. Weinstein, "Information School Choice, and Academic Achievement: Evidence from Two Experiments," (NBER Working Paper No. 13623) (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2007), [www.nber.org/papers/w13623](http://www.nber.org/papers/w13623). It should be noted that proximity is important. Justine S. Hastings, Thomas J. Kane, & Douglas O. Staiger, "Parental Preferences and School Competition: Evidence from a Public School Choice Program," (NBER Working Paper No. 11805) (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2005). Test scores are also used for residential school choice (i.e., a family decides where to live based, in part, on test scores). Test scores as they are significantly and positively related to single-family home prices. Jack Dougherty, Jeffrey Harrelson, Laura Maloney, Drew Murphy, Russell Smith, Michael Snow, & Dianne Zannoni, "School Choice in Suburbia: Test Scores, Race, and Housing Markets," *American Journal of Education*, 115 (2009): 523–548, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/599780](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/599780).
- 25 For an indication of the variety of education topics, see the Institute of Education Sciences' What Works Clearinghouse, [ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/topics.aspx](http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/topics.aspx).
- 26 [www.mathematica-mpr.com/our-focus-areas/education](http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/our-focus-areas/education).
- 27 Richard Buddin and Michelle Croft, *Missing the Mark: Students Gain Little from Mandating Extra Math and Science Courses* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2014), [www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/MissingtheMark.pdf](http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/MissingtheMark.pdf).
- 28 For example, in response to parent concerns the New York Board of Regents agreed to shortening the testing time. Elizabeth A. Harris, "New York Will Trim Common Core Exams After Many Students Skipped Them," *New York Times* (September 17, 2015) A29, [www.nytimes.com/2015/09/17/nyregion/new-york-will-trim-common-core-exams-after-many-students-skipped-them.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/17/nyregion/new-york-will-trim-common-core-exams-after-many-students-skipped-them.html).
- 29 Gregory J. Cizek, "Pockets of Resistance in the Assessment Revolution." *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice* 19(2) (2000):16–23; Richard J. Stiggins, "Evaluating Classroom Assessment Training in Teacher Education Programs," *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, 18 (1999):23–27.