

Connecticut Debate Association

December 12, 2015

Masuk, Shepaug Valley and Warde High Schools

Resolved: Parents should have the right to “opt out” of standardized tests for their children.

CT parents debate opting students out of Common Core test

JIAHUI HU, Staff Reporter, MAR 26, 2015, Yale Daily News

Over the last two years, some parents in areas around the state have pulled their children out of taking the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium test, which provides measurements for Connecticut’s Common Core standards. This movement follows on the heels of similar initiatives in states including Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan and New York. The Empire State saw over a quarter of a million parents opt their children out of Common Core-mandated testing.

Opponents of the SBAC, including Jonathan Pelto, a Connecticut education activist and blogger, said the test is not indicative of academic excellence at a school. Rather, income, parental education and language barriers most impact the testing results. Pelto added that, despite strong evidence revealing a weak correlation between test performance and quality of instruction, the state uses the test scores to evaluate teachers and designate low-performing schools for privatization. The tests would also place an undue burden on children and strain their self-esteem, Pelto said.

“Within Connecticut, we have the largest achievement gap in the country because we have high income inequality,” Pelto said. “If 80 or 90 percent of poor children are failing these tests, you then set up this dynamic where a child is told repeatedly throughout their career that they are failures.”

Although opponents of the Common Core point out many faults in the SBAC, parents and teachers should be able to gauge students’ performances on a regular basis to see opportunities for improvement, according to Don Romoser, the president of the Connecticut PTA. Romoser noted another merit of the SBAC: test results would be available in late spring or early summer so that incoming teachers could understand their students’ weaknesses and strengths.

Romoser added that some parents believe their students’ privacy may be in jeopardy because the SBAC will be administered on a computer and scored by a party separate from the Connecticut Board of Education. But, Romoser noted, Connecticut standardized tests have always been scored by a third-party organization.

Proponents of SBAC also highlighted the importance of student participation in the exam, as federal funding for Connecticut schools requires that the state benchmarks its students’ performances. Failure to do so for over 95 percent of students would jeopardize valuable resources, Romoser said.

“The vast majority of federal funding is in support of special needs children and those in needy populations,” Romoser said.

But Pelto said that despite the many years in which such a threshold has been in effect, federal funding has never been taken away.

This year, Connecticut is far from going below the threshold, as few parents in Connecticut have been opting out, Pelto said. While, in the wealthier areas, the numbers are two or three times higher, he added, the overall movement has yet to gain significant traction.

Judy Puglisi, president of the Metropolitan Business Academy in New Haven, said that no parents at her school have approached her about opting their children out of the SBAC testing.

“The testing has not started yet and it won’t start until late May,” Puglisi said. “And I really haven’t heard any conversation about opting out; students haven’t approached me and neither have parents.”

As New 'Smarter Balanced' Test Delivered, Some Students Say No

Kathleen Megan, The Hartford Courant, March 18, 2015

Districts compelled to give 'Smarter Balanced' test, but not much they can do if students refuse to take it

When East Hampton Middle School students take the Smarter Balanced test this month, Julien Minnick won't be among them. The sixth-grader has decided with the support of his parents not to take the test this year. "I think it puts a lot of unnecessary stress on kids my age," Julien said. "It's just a burden off my shoulders."

His father, Scott Minnick, who is a member of the East Hampton school board and a teacher in Glastonbury, said he feels the tests are unfair because they are not developmentally appropriate and he feels the tests and the preparation for them take up too much class time.

Julien is part of what appears to be a small percentage of families and students in Connecticut who say they are "opting out" despite the state Department of Education's warning that there is no such option and that federal funding could be jeopardized if state participation rates fall below 95 percent.

"Both state and federal laws require the administration of annual assessments in our public schools in certain grades and subjects," Interim Education Commissioner Dianna R. Wentzell wrote to school superintendents earlier this month. "These laws do not provide a provision for parents to 'opt-out' their children from taking state tests."

But as some parents and education lawyers are quick to point out, nor does state law prohibit opting out.

Minnick, who is also running to be vice president of the state's largest teachers union, the Connecticut Education Association, said he thinks that many parents might prefer not to have their children take the test, but "a lot of them are victims of this intimidation they are getting from the Capitol. It takes some fortitude, and not everyone has that. I don't blame them. It's intimidating."

The legal situation puts school superintendents into a murky and difficult legal zone, where they must tell parents there is no provision to opt out, but if the parent insists, there is little the district can do.

There is no punishment for students who don't take the test, and the law says that a satisfactory test score cannot be the "sole criterion" for promotion or graduation.

"While there is language in both state and federal law that 'mandates' that students take standardized examinations, at the end of the day there is little a school district can do to actually compel a child to sit for a standardized test," Zach Schurin and Michael P. McKeon, lawyers with Pullman & Comley wrote in their school law blog.

Schurin and McKeon concluded: "It would appear, then, that school districts ultimately have little leverage when confronted with students who have decided to opt out of Common Core standardized assessments."

Diane Dugas, East Hampton superintendent, said that she takes any requests from parents on a case-by-case basis.

"We do need to follow the state legislation and the federal legislation," Dugas said, "but we do try to have individual conversations with parents to make sure they have the facts."

Dugas said it's important to have every child take the test to keep the district's participation rate high so as not to jeopardize government funding and also to get the feedback needed to understand how students are faring.

"The test provides us with information about learning," she said, though she noted that the district has other measures of learning to consider as well.

"We encourage every child to take the test," she said, but "that being said, we would never have a child sit in front of a computer crying or have a parent dissatisfied. We would work collaboratively to make a good decision, an appropriate decision."

While the threat of the loss of federal funding stands, Dorie Turner Nolt, press secretary for the U.S. Department of Education, said in a statement that the federal agency "has not had to withhold money — yet — over this requirement because states have either complied or have appropriately sanctioned schools or districts that assessed less than 95 percent of students."

She added: "It is the responsibility of states to ensure that all students are assessed annually because it gives educators and parents an idea of how the student is doing and ensures that schools are paying attention to traditionally underserved populations like low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities and English language learners."

How Do You Opt Out?

There is no prescribed way to opt out because there is no opt-out option. Typically parents call or write a letter and may go back and forth with administrators a few times before a resolution is reached.

In December 2013, that was the sort of protocol described in a state Department of Education memorandum.

That memo suggested responses to parents that held the line firmly at first — informing the parent that there is no opt-out language in the law and suggesting a letter be sent to the parents with all the pertinent laws and regulation.

But if a parent persists, the memo said, "the district generally does not test the student and the student is counted as 'absent' [for purposes of testing], which negatively impacts the participation rate for the district."

But that memo has since been rescinded, and the letter this year from Wentzell simply states the lack of an opt-out provision and cites federal and state laws on the subject.

When Minnick sought to have Julien excluded from testing, he wrote a letter to administrators that pointedly noted that

this was not a "request" to opt out his son. "We will be informing Julien that he is not to take online tests and that if he is given one, he is not to work on it," Minnick wrote. "We ask that the school provide him with a productive alternative activity during the test administrative and preparation sessions."

Julien said he plans to spend test time reading in a conference room or possibly participating in extra music classes.

Christine Murphy of Bristol also opted out her son, Justin, a high school junior at Bristol Central High School with a letter that demanded that he not take the test, nor any pre-test or activity associated with it.

"I will be informing Justin that he is not to take online tests ... and that if he is given one he is not to work on it," Murphy wrote,

Justin, who suffers from anxiety and attention deficit disorder, said he's relieved that he doesn't have to take the test. "I think it's unfair and it's fairly long," he said.

Murphy said she saw no reason for Justin to take the test: "His teachers are well aware of his strengths and weaknesses," she said. "It's not needed to pass to twelfth grade. It's not needed to graduate, so what are we doing this for?"

Why the Interest in Opting Out This Year?

Connecticut students have taken standardized tests for decades, but widespread discussion about opting out only began to surface last year, as the state was making the move to switch to a new test created by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium.

The new test, which is administered in grades 3-8 and in 11th grade, is more difficult than the old Connecticut Mastery Test and is based on the controversial set of rigorous academic goals called the Common Core State Standards. The test will be administered in 18 states this spring.

While the old test involved paper and pencil, the new test is computerized and adaptive, which means that a student who gets a question right gets a tougher follow-up, and a student who gets a question wrong gets an easier one. This new approach is expected to enable test analysts to get a better sense of how much students understand.

Of key concern to many parents is just how difficult the test is. While in 2012-13, 63 percent of fourth grade students scored at goal or above on the CMT reading test, state officials said the percentage of fourth graders earning a "Level 3" proficiency rating on the new test is likely to be considerably lower — perhaps as much as 20 percent to 30 percent lower.

"As our kids become familiar with the expectations and the kinds of questions on the new assessments, I think we will see them improve very quickly in the early years," Wentzell said.

Last year, Connecticut school districts had the option to switch to the new Smarter Balanced test or go with the old mastery test. Ninety percent of districts chose the Smarter Balanced test. However, last year was considered a "test of the test" and individual state and district scores are not available.

This year, district and individual test scores will be available and many educators are concerned that parents may be alarmed to see scores that appear to be significantly lower than in the past.

The state Department of Education has issued a statement for parents that says that comparing the old mastery test to Smarter Balanced "is like comparing apples to oranges."

"In many cases, the scores will look lower on the Smarter Balanced tests than what many are used to seeing on the CMT/CAPT exams," the statement said. "This means that, in the beginning, fewer students may score at higher levels. This does not mean that students are learning less. Rather, it reflects that we set the bar higher."

Tom Scarice, superintendent of Madison, a high-achieving district, said he's sure that many district leaders are asking: "How do I prepare my community to understand that the schools are not failing because their students' scores came in lower than we expect in this town?"

Scarice said that he thinks extremely low scores will pose a credibility issue for the test. "I have kids who perform at the highest levels on the SAT and then a month later they are going to take this test and 40 to 60 percent are going to be [rated] 'not college or career ready?' ... It makes the test lose credibility."

Beyond the anxiety associated with taking the difficult test, Scarice said he thinks that some parents want to opt their children out of the test because they are just frustrated with how test-centered schools are becoming.

"I think parents have just woken up and said, 'Enough already.' Our kids are just going through too many tests," Scarice said.

Too Soon To Say

At this point, it's too soon to say how many parents might want to opt their children out of the test, partly because it early in the testing period.

Districts have considerable latitude as to when to give the test. The first districts to administer it started Tuesday, but the test will continue to be administered through late June. So far, Joseph Cirsuolo, executive director of the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents said it doesn't appear to be a large number of students who wish to be excluded from the test. He said he thinks that eleventh graders — who won't begin to get the test until April — may be the students most likely to want to opt out.

"I think districts are making it clear," Cirsuolo said. "The law says they are supposed to take the test."

But on the other hand he says, "You cannot force somebody to take a test if they don't want to take it."

Mark Waxenberg, executive director of the Connecticut Education Association, which is supporting the replacement of Smarter Balanced with an alternative progress testing system, said he wishes the state was taking a "more neutral position" on the matter of whether students are compelled to take the test.

"They have chosen to try to influence parents that opting out is not permissible when in effect, there is no law prohibiting it," Waxenberg said. "Each parent has different concerns about their child's academic future and abilities to take a standardized test. Each parent has to decide what's in the best interest of their child."

Waxenberg said he expects that scores will drop on the new test, not because children don't understand the content, but because they will be confused by the test format and computerized presentation. "It's not about the child's understanding the content, it's about understanding the test," he said.

James Lombardo, superintendent in East Lyme, said that his approach with parents is straightforward. If a parent submits a letter saying they want to opt out, he sends them a letter spelling out the required responsibilities under Connecticut and federal laws.

If parents still wish to opt out, he said, he tells them to notify their principal and, "We'll make an alternate plan.

"I'm not going to bully parents into thinking they have to do something or there's going to be some dramatic consequence," said Lombardo.

Lombardo said he does think the new test will "give us a better indicator" of how students are doing, but he expects to see a 30 percent drop in scores for students at first.

"It's setting a whole different benchmark," Lombardo said. "Whether or not it's reasonable, time will only tell."

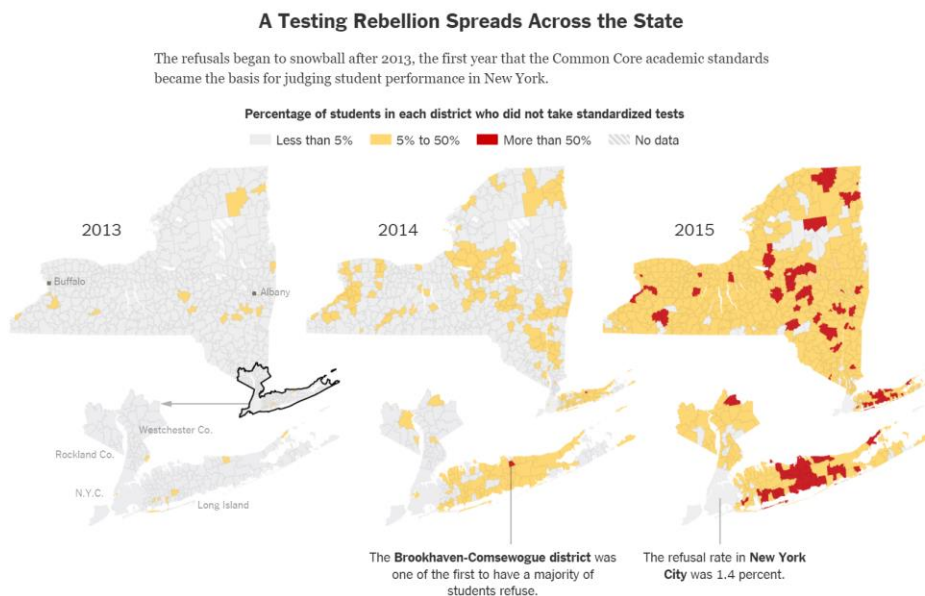
In the end, though, Lombardo said, "I don't want to be the school district with the highest test scores. I want to be the school district where the kids go on to become successful in their lives in the area they are passionate about."

20% of New York State Students Opted Out of Standardized Tests This Year

By ELIZABETH A. HARRISAUG. 12, 2015 The New York Times

More than 200,000 third through eighth graders sat out New York's standardized tests this year, education officials said on Wednesday, in a sign of increasing resistance to testing as more states make them harder to pass.

The number of students declining to take the exams quadrupled from the year before, and represented 20 percent of all



those eligible to be tested, according to data from the State Education Department. The statistic not only showed the growing strength of the "opt out" movement against standardized testing, but also put immediate pressure on state and federal officials, who must now decide whether to penalize schools and districts with low participation rates. While opt-out groups had closely estimated, based on surveys, how many students declined to take the test, the figures

released on Wednesday were the nearest to an official count. The Education Department said that about 900,000 of the 1.1 million eligible test-takers took the exams, while the rest skipped without a “known valid reason,” such as an illness. “Twenty percent of students cannot be called a fringe element,” said Loy Gross, co-founder of a refusal group called United to Counter the Core. “We’re getting the general public to understand that there are valid concerns about testings, and about the curriculum, and the direction where N.Y.S.E.D. is going. And that’s a good thing.”

New York was one of the first states to introduce tests based on the new Common Core academic standards. This year, the third under the new benchmarks, just 31 percent of the state’s students passed reading tests and 38 percent the math. Both results were slight improvements from last year but far below the passing rates under the easier, pre-2013 tests. With such a high test-refusal rate, any comparisons from year to year may now be somewhat skewed.

Officials were quick to note that 80 percent of eligible students took the exams. Still, that was a sizable drop from the year before, when 95 percent of students took the tests.

Grade-school students in New York City, like those arriving at Public School 261 in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn, in June, had to take New York State reading and math tests in the last school year.

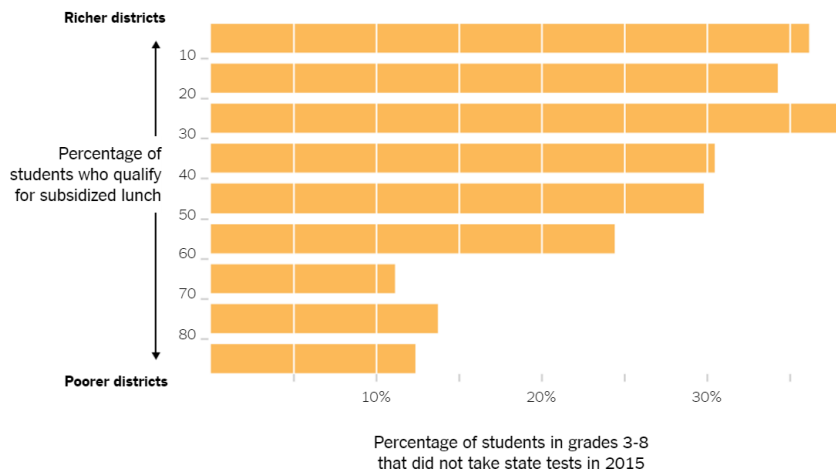
“Without an annual testing program, the progress of our neediest students may be ignored or forgotten, leaving these students to fall further behind,” the chancellor of the State Board of Regents, Merryl H. Tisch, said in a statement. “This cannot happen.”

Federal law requires 95 percent participation in the annual assessment of third through eighth graders, and districts that fall below that threshold can face sanctions from their state and the federal Education Department. The New York education commissioner, MaryEllen Elia, said the state was in discussion with federal officials on how to proceed after coming in so far below the mark. Ms. Elia said that federal funds’ being withheld from districts with low participation rates was a possibility.

Dorie Nolt, the press secretary to Arne Duncan, the federal education secretary, said in a statement: “It is the responsibility of each state to meet the obligations of federal law and ensure that all students are assessed annually, and

The Backlash by Income Level

Districts with a higher percentage of poor students had lower test-refusal rates.



the New York State Department of Education takes this responsibility very seriously. We will continue to work with New York and look to their leadership to take the appropriate steps on behalf of all kids in the state.”

Politically, however, pressure has been mounting on lawmakers to give the opt-out movement a wide berth. Last year, the New York Legislature forbade school districts from basing promotion decisions for students on test scores, and from putting them on their permanent records. There is no legal right in New York to remove one’s child from the state assessments, but no law prohibits it either.

The movement has also been weighing on Congress this year as it debates revisions to the law known as No Child Left Behind. A House bill says that the students who opt out will not be counted against their state’s participation rate. A Senate proposal does not go quite so far, but it would allow states to create their own test-refusal policies.

In New York, the annual assessments not only measure student learning and the success of education policies, but also are a key component of how schools and teachers are evaluated, especially now. The large increase in students opting out coincided with a push by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, a Democrat, to make teacher ratings more dependent on test scores, a move that was unpopular with teachers’ unions and many parents.

In New York City, the pressure to perform is particularly acute. Mayor Bill de Blasio’s authority over city schools was extended for just one year during this past legislative session, so his leadership of city schools will be re-evaluated in a few months. (His predecessor, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, last received a six-year extension.) The state recently placed 62 struggling city schools into a stewardship program, which means that if they do not improve, they will be

taken over by a receiver.

In the city, 30 percent of students passed the reading test and 35 percent passed the math, both slight improvements from the year before.

Mr. de Blasio, a Democrat, posited that the city's gains were evidence that his education policies were working.

"The building blocks we put in place all are contributing," he said at a news conference on Wednesday, "and will contribute much more going forward to the progress we will make."

In the newly released statistics, education officials framed the opt-out movement as more prevalent in white middle- and upper-middle-class districts, with Long Island a particular hot spot. In New York City, the refusal rate was less than 2 percent. Many civil rights groups have expressed concern about the movement, saying it risks eroding the integrity of data necessary to ensure that all students, especially those from disadvantaged communities, are being educated in decent schools.

"As much as people may not like testing, it's the only way available for us to document and to hold schools and school districts accountable," said Marc Morial, president of the National Urban League. "We can't close the achievement gap unless we know what it is and where it is and how big it is."

The State Education Department also noted that students who scored at Levels 1 and 2 last year were more likely to sit out this year than students who had scored at Levels 3 (which is considered passing) and 4, a sign that the increasing difficulty of the tests might have factored into some parents' decisions.

Kathleen DiLieto, until recently the president of the Parent-Teacher Association at Terryville Road School in Port Jefferson Station, on Long Island, said that when her older daughter first sat out the tests two years ago, in third grade, she was in the minority, but that by this year, most of her classmates joined her in opting out. In her school district, 79 percent of students did not take the tests, one of the highest opt-out rates in the state.

Ms. DiLieto said she had heard from teachers in her family, speakers at events for parents in her area and even her local superintendent that the tests demanded skills that were too advanced for the age of the children taking them.

"These tests are developmentally destructive for our kids so I just didn't want my children to go through that," she said. "I just didn't want them to experience something so negative and so stressful in their lives at their young ages."

Schools in and around the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Park Slope and Carroll Gardens registered some of the highest numbers of refusals in New York City, according to city and state data. At the Brooklyn New School in Carroll Gardens, just 49 students took the English exams, while 298 did not.

While the figures released on Wednesday established New York as the center of the opt-out movement, it has begun spreading as other states switched to Common Core-aligned tests this year. In New Jersey, for example, 5 percent of students did not take the tests this year. In Colorado, where a new state law requires that districts allow parents to excuse their children from the state tests, 5 percent of seventh graders did not take the social studies test this year and 6 percent of eighth graders sat out the science test, state officials said.

Parents in New York can usually obtain their child's scores from their schools or superintendent's offices; in New York City, they are also available on a new website to parents who have signed up for access.

Overall scoring patterns in New York State remained largely unchanged, with black and Hispanic students making small proficiency gains but remaining at least 20 percentage points behind white test-takers. And while 52 percent of students passed English exams in so-called low need districts, only 11.5 percent of students passed in Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and Yonkers, the state's four largest cities after New York.

Charter school students performed slightly worse than the state as a whole on the English exams and slightly better on the math. But those in New York City did better on both than charters elsewhere in the state. At Success Academy, a fast-growing network of city charter schools known for a demanding approach to instruction and test preparation, virtually every grade tested had at least a 50 percent passing rate, with half the grades achieving at least 85 percent.

A surge in parents keeping their children out of New York state tests in some districts this week is raising questions about how this spring's scores can be used to rate teachers—especially in classrooms where nobody took the test.

The number of children opting out of New York state exams appeared to be far higher than last year, according to opt-out advocates compiling spreadsheets of local tallies from news reports, parents and school administrators.

Opting Out of Standardized Tests Isn't the Answer

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD of The New York Times, AUG. 14, 2015

An alarming 200,000, or 20 percent, of the students in grades three through eight in New York State public schools this year refused to take the state's standardized tests in reading and math that are supposed to measure progress in meeting

national academic standards.

This ill-conceived boycott could damage educational reform — desperately needed in poor and rural communities — and undermine the Common Core standards adopted by New York and many other states. The standards offer the best hope for holding school districts accountable for educating all students, regardless of race or income.

The 200,000 students, out of 1.1 million, who skipped the tests did not have a known valid reason, like illness. That was quadruple the number from the year before and by far the highest opt-out rate for any state. In some school districts the opt-out rate was above 80 percent. For the most part, those opting out were white and in wealthy or middle-class communities. In New York City, less than 2 percent opted out.

Many parents who oppose the tests say the tests are too difficult or do not track with classroom instruction. Of the students who took the tests statewide, only 31 percent had a proficient score on reading while 38 percent were proficient in math.

And teachers have complained that they will be judged unfairly based on how well students perform on tests that they consider faulty; at least one of their union leaders urged parents to boycott the tests.

Some of these complaints are legitimate. New York has adopted some of the most stringent testing standards in the country — equal to or higher than the bar set by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which most experts consider the best measure of student performance — but has not done enough to train teachers to carry out a more rigorous curriculum.

In response to parental protests, the State Legislature last year forbade school districts to use test scores as the primary factor in grade promotions or to put the scores on a student's permanent record. Current law also limits the use of test scores to rate teachers and requires that most of the rating be based on other factors, like classroom observations.

There may well be too much testing, but the math and reading tests, which come once a year, are not the ones to eliminate. And having a large number of students opting out of the tests could hurt efforts to document and close the achievement gap between low-income and minority students and more privileged students.

Federal law requires that at least 95 percent of eligible students take the annual tests, and districts that fall short may face penalties, including a loss of federal aid. But imposing penalties would further damage poor districts that already lack sufficient money to improve their academic performance or help subpar students with remedial tutoring. At the same time, financial penalties might not persuade districts with the highest opt-out rates — often the wealthier ones — to participate, since they are apt to receive little federal funding.

Although the state can also withhold funds, officials seem reluctant to stoke further parental anger.

With opt-out activists threatening to redouble their efforts next year, political leaders need to convince everyone involved — school boards, superintendents, principals, parents, state education officials, guidance counselors, and teachers and their unions — of the importance of these tests and find ways to help students and teachers meet the challenge they pose.

More Students Are Graduating High School Than Ever Before. But Can They Read?

By Laura Moser, Slate, October 22, 2015

Should we be celebrating—or scrutinizing—the increase in high school graduation rates?

While more Common Core-aligned test scores trickle in, the U.S. Department of Education has released preliminary data about state-by-state high school graduation rates. Comparing these two—very different—results says a lot about the difficulty of reliably measuring student achievement across the country, and the slipperiness of the metrics used.

First, the good(-looking) news: High school graduation rates continue to rise. Thirty-six states graduated more students on time this year than last while only six (plus the District of Columbia) saw decreases in graduation rates. Eight states remained flat. Even better, the achievement gap between white and minority students tightened in more than half the states.

But turn to Common Core test results and you get a less rosy picture. Across the board, scores are lower than on previous tests—which was expected, and a big part of the point of the new, more rigorous tests. But still. As the acronym of one of the main Common Core tests, PARCC—which stands for Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers—makes clear, these tests were designed to judge college- and career-readiness, and U.S. students don't seem to be up to the task just yet, even if they're graduating on time in droves.

Just look at Alabama, which had the second-highest graduation-rate increase between 2012–13 and 2014–15 across all categories except for children with disabilities. Graduation rates for black students shot up 10.1 points to 84 percent, and

“economically disadvantaged” students—who saw less spectacular gains nationwide—shot up 9.7 percent. But last year, when Alabama students took the state’s Common Core–aligned test for the first time, in “nearly every grade and both subjects, more than half of Alabama’s students [fell] below the cut points that connote being on track for success in college,” according to Education Week.

And in New Jersey, 88.6 percent of students who started high school in 2010 graduated on time. But on the state’s Common Core test results, released this week, the majority of students in grades 3 to 11 failed to meet grade-level benchmarks, with roughly 25 percent hitting targets in algebra II and geometry. Only 41 percent of 11th-graders were considered proficient in English. So what’s the good of graduating a bunch of kids who may or may not be able to read proficiently, beyond helping politicians and policymakers meet the imperative of “showing growth”?

It’s an open question worth revisiting every time these amazingly awesome and encouraging graduation rates come out. Over the summer, NPR did a lengthy investigation of the numbers behind that accomplishment: whether kids are graduating more because schools are actually doing a better job of educating them, or whether schools are simply misclassifying students and/or lowering the bar to achievement. Take Texas, which last year made impressive gains in graduation rates, with a dazzling 88 percent of students graduating on time—but it did so simply by changing the definition of what it means to graduate. Where does student achievement end and statistical gamesmanship begin? And are high graduation rates as meaningful when basic proficiency is still questionable? The NPR story cites a Brookings Institution study that examined young people’s chances of achieving a middle-class income by age 40. The researchers found that it wasn’t enough just to earn a regular high school diploma; you had to achieve a GPA of at least 2.5 (a B- or C+ average) to reap long-term social and economic benefits.

“That finding,” the story continues, “suggests that bending the rules and lowering standards may hurt young people more than it helps them.”

In other words, bring on the harder exams.

Laura Moser, a writer for Slate’s Schooled project, has written for the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, and Washingtonian.

Only Alternative for Some Students Sitting Out Standardized Tests: Do Nothing

By ELIZABETH A. HARRIS, APRIL 23, 2015, The New York Times

Richard Hughes, the superintendent of Central Valley School District in upstate New York, is being haunted by two minivans and an S.U.V.

All three vehicles have been circulating around town with painted-on messages of protest. One message, “refuse NYS testing,” is directed at parents. But another is clearly aimed at Dr. Hughes and his school board: “Central Valley sit and stare policy,” it says, punctuated on either side by a frowny face.

“I’ve been inundated with emails saying: ‘How can you call yourself an educator? You should not be forcing kids to take tests,’ ” Dr. Hughes said.

With a growing number of children sitting out state tests this year, the energies of the so-called opt-out movement are now focusing not only on guaranteeing the ability of students to refuse the tests but also on what those students are allowed to do during the exams. Their targets are districts that require students to remain quietly in their classrooms and do nothing, or as opt-out advocates have labeled it, “sit and stare.”

Gregory B. Jarvis Middle School is in the Central Valley School District, which has a “sit and stare” policy for students who have opted out of taking the state tests. Credit Emma Tannenbaum for The New York Times

While “sit and stare” policies can still be found in pockets around the country, efforts to combat them in New York appear to be working. More districts, including New York City’s, are offering backup activities on testing days, like time in the library, work sheets or simply allowing students to read to themselves. There are bills under consideration in both houses of the State Legislature that would require districts to provide alternatives.

But a few districts are sticking to the rule that students not filling in bubbles may only sit, think and, if they so choose, stare.

Logistically, some of those districts say that they do not have enough staff members to supervise alternative activities. But philosophically, even letting students sit in their seats and read for pleasure strikes some officials as unfair to students who are taking the exams.

“Our expectation was they were going to take the assessment,” said Brian Schmitt, superintendent of the Genesee Valley Central School District in western New York, which does not provide alternative activities. “We were not going to reward them by having them do something that other students may perceive as either fun or more interesting than taking the assessment, because that’s not fair to kids who were doing the right thing.”

Some of Mr. Schmitt's fellow holdouts around the state have been besieged not only by minivans, but also by phone calls and emails, and websites listing them on a "wall of shame."

Seth Turner, the superintendent of the Saugerties Central School District in the Hudson Valley, which did not provide alternate activities last year, said he received scores of emails and calls, more than 95 percent of which, he estimated, were from people who do not live in his district; he said the bulk came from Long Island, where the opt-out movement is strong. Many of the messages that Mr. Turner and other superintendents received, they said, likened the sit-and-stare policy to child abuse.

"It was absolutely horrific," Mr. Turner said. "Anybody who is making that statement really is not familiar with what goes on with children who are victims of abuse."

"You're going to force a child to sit for an hour?" he continued. Growing up, he said, "that's what I called church."

Mr. Turner recently decided, however, that teachers could give refusing students academic materials like work sheets.

Friday is the last of six days of state testing, three for math and three for English, with each day's exam lasting up to 90 minutes.

Parents of students who opt out say that is a long time for anybody to sit and do nothing. They see sit-and-stare policies as punishment for children whose parents are just trying to look out for them. Official numbers will not be available until the summer, but opt-out groups have estimated that more than 150,000 of the roughly one million eligible test takers sat out the tests this year, more than double the number from last year.

Those who support statewide testing say it is crucial to measuring the success of public education, especially for struggling schools in poor districts. But Jeanette Deutermann, who founded an opt-out group on Long Island, said that testing can stir intense passions in parents who see refusing as a necessary means of protecting their children from a system that focuses too much on standardized assessments.

"That mother bear syndrome comes out," Ms. Deutermann said. "I see you," she said of those who acquiesce to the current testing system, "as someone who is potentially harming my child by saying O.K."

Blake Carnright, 10, a fifth grader, is among the estimated 40 percent of eligible students in Central Valley who refused to take the English exam last week. Those students must sit with the test in front of them for 30 minutes before they are permitted to read something else. Dr. Hughes, the superintendent, said that he and the school board believe the tests provide valuable information. Allowing students to just sit and read, he said, may broadcast to families that it is O.K. to skip the tests.

So during the tests, Blake sits with the test booklet in front of him for that half an hour, swinging his arms and looking around the room, he said, before the teacher allows him to pull out a book. Last week, he read two books about Captain Underpants.

"I don't like how we have to sit there forever, because it's boring," Blake said. "We don't really get to do anything but just sit there."

Blake's mother, Angie Carnright, is one of the minivan drivers. "The sit and stare policy is what really made me want to push back," she said in an email. "Otherwise I probably would have remained more on the sidelines of the issue and just followed along as an observer."

Some superintendents in districts that have had sit-and-stare policies said the pressure on them, and on parents who are having their children take the tests, is akin to bullying. Richard J. Burns, the superintendent of the East Hampton schools on Long Island, said, "If their kids were treated this way, they'd be in the school the next second."

Loy Gross, who runs the well-trafficked "wall of shame" for a group called United to Counter the Core, said that in a large movement, there will always be a few people who take things too far, but that she and her group have always asked those who contact the districts to be respectful. She offered her apologies to anyone who felt bullied.

"We have never condoned bullying," Ms. Gross said. "Honestly, we believe that's what sit and stare is."

In East Hampton last year, students were expected to sit quietly in the room while peers took the test, but many of them just stayed home instead. This year, though, while the number of refusals remains relatively small, Mr. Burns said it was growing, so just two days before the tests began, district officials said students who opted out could sit in the library and read.

That plan offered two advantages: preserving a uniform testing environment for those taking the exams, he said, and not encouraging those who wanted to make the sit-and-stare rule an issue.

But the policy comes with drawbacks.

"They're being snarky," Mr. Burns said of some students who refused the test. Saying, 'Ha-ha, I don't have to take the test!' as they're leaving the room. Or 'Good luck on the test!' in that derogatory tone."

He said the elementary school principal told those students that their behavior was not appropriate.

Last week, about 40 students sat out the English tests, but by Wednesday, when the math exams began, Mr. Burns said, the number had grown to about 70.

Connecticut State Department of Education

<http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2748&Q=334726>

The Connecticut summative assessment system includes the Smarter Balanced assessment for Grades 3 through 8. Students are also assessed on CMT/CAPT Science in Grades 5, 8 and 10. Students with significant cognitive disabilities in Grades 3 through 8 and 11 are assessed with the Connecticut Alternate Assessment (CTAA).

Connecticut Summative Assessments 2015 - 2016

State Assessment	Content Area(s)	Grade(s)	Testing Window*
<u>CMT/CAPT</u>	Science	5, 8 and 10	March 1 – 29
<u>CMT/CAPT Skills Checklist</u>	Science	5, 8 and 10	Upload Dates: March 1 – 29
<u>Connecticut Alternate Assessment</u>	English Language Arts & Mathematics	3 – 8 and 11	March 15 – May 27
<u>Smarter Balanced</u>	English Language Arts/ Literacy & Mathematics	3 – 8	To Be Determined
<u>SAT</u>	Reading, Writing and Language, & Mathematics	11	March 2 Makeup Date: April 27

*These are preliminary testing windows and subject to change.
