

The Opt-Out Movement

Parent Refusal to Participate in Statewide Standardized Testing

What is the Opt-Out movement?

The Opt-Out movement is a form of resistance towards the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), as well as a parent-led campaign to end the expansion of what they consider to be excessive and high-stakes standardized testing. Advocates of this movement argue that opting-out is a way for families to regain their voices and a reminder that parents and students are important stakeholders in education policy.

NCLB provisions, particularly the implementation of statewide standardized testing, were legislated in order to increase accountability on behalf of schools and teachers for student achievement. However, members of the Opt-Out movement believe that standardized testing corrupts classroom curriculum by encouraging teachers to teach a narrow set of skills, with the sole purpose of boosting test performance. Consequently, advocates of this movement agree that standardized tests are inadequate indicators of a child's development and are increasingly choosing to "opt-out," by refusing to have their children take these tests.

What is the debate surrounding this movement?

Why opt-out?

Critics of standardized testing argue against the practice of administering statewide exams, because they believe the following:

- *Standardized Tests are a poor measure of student achievement and do not help prepare students for success in today's world*
 - Emphasis on standardized testing can cause teachers to "teach to the test," rather than focus on a deeper understanding and practical application of the classroom curriculum
 - Schools reduce instruction time in subjects such as art, history and music in order to provide increased time and resources to English and math, in preparation for these state exams
- *Standardized Tests are a poor measure of teacher and school effectiveness*
 - There are many factors that can contribute to a child's test score, that are not adequately represented within the structure of a standardized test
- *Standardized Tests can cause undue stress and anxiety to school-age children*
 - Emphasizing test performance, while competitively comparing student results, places a high-level of pressure on children that may not be in their best interest
 - Placing, what are considered to be, artificial standards on children can force them to work towards goals that may not be developmentally appropriate for them as individuals and can set them up to hate learning
- *Standardized tests have caused states to lower their standards*
 - Because states are responsible for creating their own tests, a state is capable of lowering their academic bar in order to increase test scores

Why opt-in?

Proponents of standardized testing advocate in favor of statewide exams for the following reasons:

- *Standardized tests are designed to measure how well schools are teaching their students*
 - Standardized tests link student outcomes to state academic standards
 - Test results evaluate teacher performance, regardless of tenure status
- *Standardized tests hold teachers and schools directly accountable for student achievement*
 - If a school's results are repeatedly low then steps are taken to improve or restructure the school
 - Schools who consistently fail to meet their "Adequate Yearly Progress" (AYP) targets are designated as "schools in need of improvement," and are required to re-allocate funds towards an improvement plan
- *Standardized tests provide useful data on student achievement across schools, districts, racial, and socio-economic lines*
 - A particular concern of opt-in advocates is that without reliable standardized test data low-income and minority students will continue to be educated in failing schools

- Many civil rights activists are opposed to the opt-out movement because these tests provide crucial data on school inequity across racial lines
- *Standardized tests have the ability to increase parental involvement in their child's education*
 - These tests drive parent involvement by providing parents with school and district report cards according to their AYP data, and in turn, help inform parent decisions regarding school choice
 - If a school fails to meet their AYP target two or more years in a row, they are generally required to offer eligible students the opportunity to either transfer to a higher performing school, tutoring services, or other educational after-school programs.

What are the outcomes associated with opting-out?

Many opponents of the Opt-Out movement argue that refusing to take these tests places a school's federal aid at risk. The NCLB act states that in order for schools to make Adequate Yearly Progress they must test at least 95% of their student population. However, penalties only apply to schools that receive Title I funds, and there is nothing in the law that specifically decrees the withholding of federal aid.

Currently, more than 40 states have received waivers by the Obama Administration from the most burdensome NCLB sanctions, removing penalties from all but the lowest-scoring "priority" schools - schools in the bottom 5% of the state.

In states without a waiver, 100% of students must score "proficient" on the state exams. As a result, the majority of schools do not meet their AYP targets, regardless of these parent boycotts. Schools that don't meet their AYP for two or more consecutive years must set aside 5-15% of their Title I and II funds for "supplemental educational services," for example, tutoring.

In sum, although districts may face lower recognition and a re-allocation of federal funds as an increasing amount of students choose to opt-out, there is currently no direct correlation between this refusal and decreased federal funding.

Federal funding aside, in some states students may receive penalties for opting out. For example, students may risk grade promotion by failing to demonstrate their readiness on state exams, and in some instances, high school students may risk graduating because the state tests are a part of their graduation requirements. However, not all states have a legal procedure for students that opt-out and consequences can vary by state and by school. As a result, it is important for families to research state-specific legislation in order to make informed decisions regarding both their participation and opposition to this movement.