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COMMENTARY

Q&A: An Early Opt-Out Talks About School Without Tests

By **Fred L. Hamel & Catherine Ross Hamel**

From the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, we opted out of mandated state testing for our two children. We both worked in public schools at the time and found ourselves living out the advent of the movement for high-stakes accountability. We saw up close the concerning effects of new testing pressures. Teachers began distrusting their own instincts, as the testing apparatus directed their focus elsewhere. Students along a normal spectrum, trying their best, were labeled inadequate. We saw teachers confronted with new data that consumed significant time without adding anything helpful or new to the work of teaching and learning. [← Back to Story](#)

In March 2003, we published a **Commentary** in *Education Week* clarifying our reasons for opting our children out. It was "not a decision we make lightly," we said. We emphasized our right and responsibility as parents to "protect our children from activities not in their interests."

We still feel this way, particularly as standardized tests are even more pervasive, more frequent, and used in unprecedented ways. We still believe that parents have a critical role to play in holding school systems accountable, especially in resisting simplified solutions that fail to serve the learning needs of children. We are not surprised that parents across the country are now voicing concerns similar to those we shared 12 years ago. In many ways, the Achilles' heel of the high-stakes testing/accountability movement remains conscientious and informed parents—those motivated, as we wrote in 2003, "to preserve the best of what public schools have to offer our kids."

At the time, our daughter was 12 years old and our son was 9. Both went on to have positive experiences in our local public schools, and both have graduated from college. Our daughter, Teddi, is now 24 and currently works for Outward Bound as an outdoor educator. We recently had a conversation with Teddi about her perceptions of being opted out from state-mandated

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tests. As more families consider the pros and cons of new testing realities, we offer some of her observations here, as the voice of one young adult thinking back upon the experience of being opted out by her parents.

Fred/Catherine: What do you remember about opting out when you were younger?

Teddi: I do remember 3rd grade. I did a project on *The Jungle Book*, by Rudyard Kipling, instead of doing the test, and I remember I was really into that. I was barely aware that testing was going on because I was in my own little corner, taking notes, and I think I chose the book and the project. I would have been 8 years old, so it might have been the first time I read a chapter book and annotated it, simply. I wasn't just reading; I did something with the book. My teacher was very respectful and supportive. I wasn't an outcast or anything. I was in the same room, and she just let me work. I later went to India as a college student, and I remembered that project. *The Jungle Book* takes place in India. It stayed with me, impacted me.

Fred/Catherine: What impact do you think our family's position on high-stakes testing had on you as a learner and as a classmate at the time?

Teddi: I don't think it detracted from anything. I felt I did well in school regardless of the testing. At the time, my teachers seemed fine with it. I went on to work hard in high school, and I always felt that what I enjoyed and excelled in was rich curriculum like world history projects, reading books, and writing essays—things I got really engaged in and that had a lot of meaning. That's the stuff I really cared about and did well on. All that is what eventually mattered in college—deeper connective thinking.

Fred/Catherine: You decided to take the standardized state test as a 10th grader. Tell us about that.

Teddi: I think that it was required then to graduate. And at that point, I don't think I wanted to fight any battles that weren't really mine. I didn't feel super strongly that the tests were harming me in such a way that I should have to fight this huge system. I knew I could take the test and pass it, so I just took it, which, as a 10th grader, made sense. I also knew I would be taking the SAT and the ACT. To get into college, I would have to take some standardized tests. But it turns out that standardized-testing tools are really different. The SAT is different from the state test, so I don't think that ended up having any bearing. I do remember sitting in Mr. G.'s 10th grade portable [classroom] during state testing thinking, "This is so bland." I probably was a little nervous, but what I remember is a very sterile process. If it was now, I would love to challenge the system by not taking the test.

Fred/Catherine: Now, three years out of college, what thoughts do you have about how we managed state testing with you?

reflects a range of perspectives on parents' opting their children out of tests, from researchers who are studying the phenomenon, to parents who have long embraced testing boycotts, to teachers whose opinions on the subject vary widely.

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Commentary

Read "[State-Mandated Testing: Why We Opt Out,](#)" Fred L. Hamel and Catherine Ross Hamel's 2003 Commentary on opting out.

Teddi: I'm proud of it. Trying to be educated in the school system as it is, not even regarding testing, was hard, because so many aspects of public schooling are structure-oriented and not substance-oriented. Still, the learning I did was really good. But the tests were on the opposite side of that. I'm happy now because I think that what I gained from my education had nothing to do with tests. There are more holistic ways of helping and assessing students.

Fred/Catherine: Thinking about your adult future, what thoughts do you have about opting out?

Teddi: Working in outdoor education is so hands-on; you're teaching social studies and biology and all these different topics along with human skills. After a month of intensive learning with students, you have a really good grasp of how to assess them and how to help them develop. It would be hard for me to be in classrooms with students I know really well and see them being assessed on this tiny little aspect of their performance. From my experience as a kid, the tests were so outside of what I usually did and what I loved about learning that it didn't match. I think that if I were a parent, I would give my kids the choice, like you guys gave me the choice. Also, similar to you, I would want to take a stand against high-stakes testing. I would give my child that perspective.

Fred L. Hamel is a professor in the school of education at the University of Puget Sound, in Tacoma, Wash. Catherine Ross Hamel is a speech-language pathologist in the Tacoma public schools.

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