

EDUCATION WEEK

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The Opt-Out Movement Is Gaining Momentum

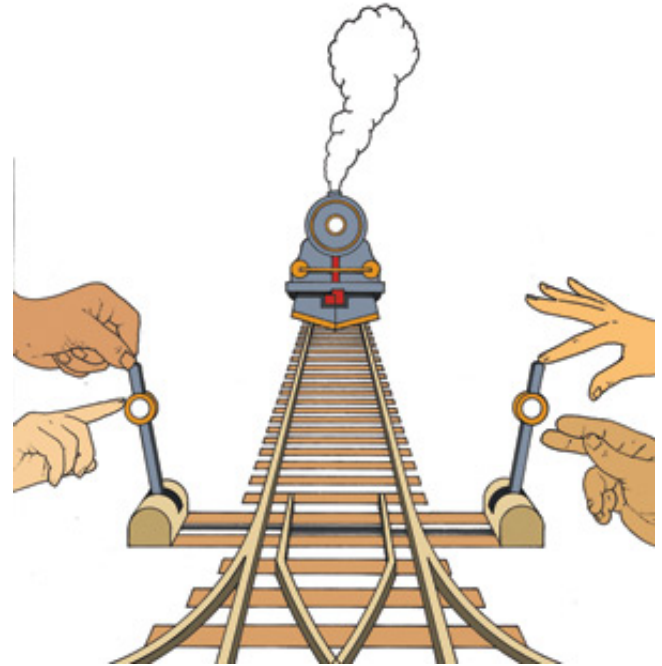
By **Michael P. Evans & Andrew Saultz**

While addressing a group of state schools superintendents in 2013, **U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan described opposition** to the Common Core State Standards as driven by "white suburban moms" whose primary concern was that "their child isn't as brilliant as they thought they were, and their school isn't quite as good as they thought."

In essence, Secretary Duncan dismissed parental opposition as the byproduct of self-interested parents who were more concerned about solidifying their social status than with the quality of education their children received. Unfortunately, this line of thinking has been all too common in education circles and has resulted in families being pushed to the margins when it comes to education policymaking.

Two years later, opposition to both the common core and its affiliated assessments has grown exponentially. Concerned families are not going away, and they increasingly are taking action to express their dissatisfaction by opting their children out of mandated state tests. As the opt-out movement gained momentum in Ohio, **the state's department of education responded** by providing school administrators with a two-page bulleted list of talking points that outlined potential consequences, including grade retention, ineligibility for high school graduation, and fallout for teachers, schools, and communities. Contrary to the oversimplified depiction of parents as self-interested actors, many families are still willing to risk short-term consequences for their children to send a larger message about the state of public education.

Instances of parent activism are on the rise and are not limited to issues related to the common core and standardized testing. Across the United States, families are starting to organize both formally and informally around a wide range of public education issues, from concerns about school funding to the school-to-prison pipeline. Perhaps not surprisingly, the emergence of these efforts runs parallel to the steady decline of local



INSIDE OPT-OUT

The Pushback Against Testing

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power in education policy. Currently, there are limited opportunities for family and community engagement in education policymaking, resulting in legislation that has centralized power in state capitals and Washington. Furthermore, when families are included in education policy, policymakers cast them in the supporting role of "public education consumer." It is a role that narrowly defines family engagement and largely ignores the creative potential and wisdom of local communities.

History tells us that social movements are often sparked at the local level, with early efforts supported by networks of individuals with strong ties (friends, family, neighbors, and others). As the Stanford University sociologist Doug McAdam noted in his writing about the civil rights movement, strong relationships with high levels of trust provide participants with the confidence to engage in high-risk activism. For opt-out families, this growth is being facilitated through the use of social media and by the development of national organizations like United Opt Out. At home in Ohio, the opt-out movement motivated the passage of **safe-harbor legislation** designed to protect parents, teachers, and school districts from the potential consequences of opting out of testing for the upcoming academic year.

It is time for policymakers to reconsider how they engage with the public. We are in the process of conducting a study focused on the opt-out movement in Ohio. While our research is not yet complete, we have already discovered that the vast majority of the 614 districts in Ohio report that less than 2 percent of families have opted out. This means that the fiercest opposition is centralized in a handful of districts, where anywhere from 10 percent to 20 percent of the families are choosing not to take part in testing.

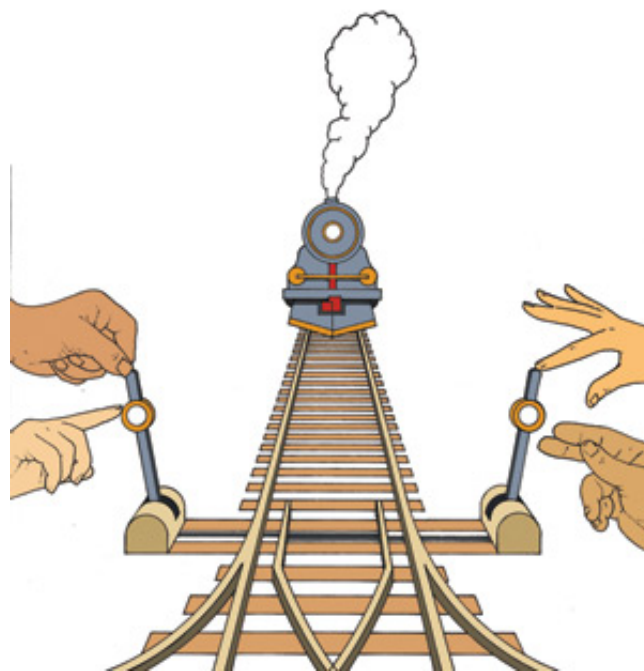
Based on news accounts, parents opting their children out of testing is a national trend, with some districts reporting that more than 50 percent of their eligible students have missed one or more tests. While occurrences of opt-outs are not evenly distributed, we believe that these pockets of dissent are significant, as they may signal the beginning of a broader change movement in public education—a movement in which families refuse to be marginalized in the educational policymaking process.

The opt-out movement is evidence that education policymakers need to find new ways to engage with families and communities. Perhaps instead of jumping to conclusions about who these parent activists are, or what they believe, we should begin by slowing down and listening to what they have to say. Working with the public is the only true way to create sustainable educational change.

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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—Steve Braden for Education Week

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