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Standardized Testing Has Created an Unfair Burden on Public Schools

By [Bill Ivey](#) on May 20, 2015 9:23 PM

This is the second of a four-part conversation on [the opt-out movement](#).



Bill Ivey

It was the first day of my 2009-2010 Humanities 7 class and I was explaining how the course works—how students design all the units around their own questions, with opportunities for both group work and individual research. One student raised her hand and said, "This sounds great and all, but how will it help us prepare for the **MCAS**?" "Oh," I said. "We're an independent school. We don't have to do the MCAS." The students burst into applause, shouting and cheering and clapping and raising their fists in celebration as one student from out of state asked quietly, "What's the MCAS?"

Bruce Baker, a well-known and respected researcher and blogger at School Finance 101 (and also my cousin), has referred to independent schools as essentially an unacknowledged opt-out option in his post "[What about those high income families who opted out long before the school year started?](#)" (His earlier piece, "[Thoughts on Elite Private Independent Schools and Public Education Reforms](#)," provides an interesting context.) While we fret about what percentage of public school children opting out leads to a so-called "unacceptable skewing of test results," we rarely if ever think about how many students are no longer in the public school system in the first place. In point of fact, private school enrollment is about 10 percent of public school enrollment, a significant proportion.

Of course, it is not only private school families who are supporting the opt-out movement one way or another, and it is not only the wealthy. Far from it, as [José Vilson](#) and other members of [#educolor](#) have pointed out. Indeed, for the opt-out movement to succeed, as I hope it does, we will need to acknowledge and highlight the full range of diversity of people supporting it. We can't allow it to be belittled and mischaracterized as just a bunch of [white suburban moms](#) forced to face the fact their kids aren't the smartest and highest-achieving students ever to walk the face of the Earth (that's simply offensive, at multiple levels). The specific reasons for supporting it may vary from person to person, but the overall sentiment is clear: it isn't just that testing isn't helping schools improve, it's that (as research shows) [testing is actually undermining efforts to improve schools](#).

I know [our middle school program](#), as part of a feminist school seeking to elevate our students' voices and enable their personal agency, does everything in its power to eliminate external motivation and fill the resulting vacuum with the power and endurance of internal motivation. Visiting parents appreciate how we make plenty of room for the arts in our curriculum—all middle schoolers take Chorus, Dance, Music (including the options of four performing groups), Visual Arts, and Theatre. My current students love how our standards-based system enables them to focus on specific skill development, reflect on how they're doing, target efforts for improvement, and eventually take pride in their growth. They feel more relaxed, more able to focus on and enjoy learning. They love how they have a genuine voice and say in what they are learning. They love the absence of high-stakes standardized testing that enables all of that to happen.

The good life.

I see no reason why every single public school shouldn't be able to offer the same high quality holistic education to its students. After all, our model is based on [the principles of This We Believe](#) developed and refined by the [Association for Middle Level Education](#)—principles that were in fact largely developed in public schools. Given those origins, it is unfair and ironic that public schools are currently running repeatedly into roadblocks to using the exact same model that brings us praise and attention. If the larger opt-out movement can shed light and focus attention on that injustice, and eventually lead to its being righted, then I am 100% in support of it.

We were five months into my 2010-2011 Humanities 7 class and I was quietly circulating among my students during "choice time," checking in on what they were doing and how it was going. As I approached one student, she looked at me anxiously and said in response to my caring and inquiring glance, "When do we start the MCAS?" "Oh," I said. "We're an independent school. We don't have to do the MCAS." She closed her eyes as the tension slowly drained from her face, and she murmured, "Thank God."

I envision a world where no student, at any school, ever has to say that again.

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