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Testing Skeptics Aim to Build Support for Opt-Out Strategy

By **Karla Scoon Reid**

Riding what they see as a wave of anti-testing sentiment among parents, opponents of high-stakes assessments believe a strategy known as opt-out—having parents refuse to let their children take state-mandated tests—could force policymakers to take note of their cause.

Once considered a rarity, the opt-out push has prompted high-profile boycott efforts and meetings in large districts such as Chicago and led more parents nationwide to join forces with anti-testing advocates in arguing that the assessments are unnecessary, excessive, and, in some cases, even harmful to students.

Such efforts come at a time when states across the country are preparing to field-test assessments aligned with the Common Core State Standards, and when controversy over the common core in many statehouses has reignited the debate over testing overload.

In Chicago, where students started taking **the Illinois Standards Achievement Test** last week, teachers at two schools will likely face disciplinary action for **refusing to administer the assessment**. Parent advocates last week were asserting that up to 2,000 students in grades 3-8 opted out, though a Chicago school district official disputed that tally, estimating the number to be fewer than 1,000.

Rallies and meetings promoting parents' rights to refuse student testing are planned in a wide range of communities, from Denver to Port Jefferson Station, N.Y. And a new national coalition called the Testing Resistance & Reform Spring, which officially launched in February, hopes to coordinate such local efforts to start a more substantial assault on reforming and scaling back high-stakes testing.

"Opting out is one powerful tactic to make policymakers aware that parents are fed up with testing overkill," said Robert A. Schaeffer, public education director for **FairTest**, based in Jamaica Plain, Mass., which is part of that new coalition. "Opting out, at its core, is a form of civil disobedience."

But opting out can be a murky and messy process in most states because few specific guidelines exist outlining what rights parents have to refuse testing on behalf of their children.

Michelle Exstrom, the director of the education program at the National Conference of State Legislatures, said state laws generally require districts to administer the assessments, but students are not required to take the tests. Federal law, she said, is largely silent on the issue of opting out.

Variations Seen

While some state legislation allows the parents of students with disabilities to opt out of testing, Ms. Exstrom characterized opt-out policies as "vague."

In California, the education code explicitly grants parents permission to refuse the test on behalf of a student. In Illinois and New York, the student, not the parent, must refuse the test. (Parent advocates say forcing students, some as young as 9, to refuse the test is unconscionable—in New York, some parents are being advised by advocates to pin "I refuse" notes on their children's shirts, instead.)

Meanwhile, the U.S. Department of Education advises that while parents may have the right to opt out of state tests, such a decision could end up hurting a school's ability to meet the 95 percent testing participation rate mandated under the No Child Left Behind Act law. Failure to meet that rate is one of the many requirements for schools that can trigger academic interventions.

"It's a bizarre game of semantics," Jeanette Deutermann, a co-founder of the parent advocacy group **New York State Allies for Public Education**, said about who can or cannot refuse the test. Ms. Deutermann, who lives in Bellmore, N.Y., believes the lack of explicit guidelines is designed to discourage parents from availing themselves of their right to opt out. And, she said, oftentimes it works.

But Ms. Exstrom said opting out is gaining momentum nationally because parents don't understand how crucial student-level data is to ensure that schools and districts are held accountable for educating all children.

"Parents don't see the bigger picture, in part, because they don't see the data," she said.

This year's national testing landscape is complicated by the common-core-aligned assessments being piloted to replace state tests developed to meet federal NCLB mandates. Some states are seeking and have been granted "double-testing" waivers from the U.S. Department of Education to ease the testing burden.

Common-Core Heat

Some anti-testing advocates also believe that opposition voiced at public meetings around the country about the common core is manifesting itself in parents wanting to exercise some measure of control over their children's education.

"[Opting out] sends a message that these are our children, and we will decide where we draw the line," said Julie Woestehoff, the executive director of the Chicago-based Parents United for Responsible Education.

Daria Hall, the director of K-12 policy development for the Washington-based Education Trust, said that parents have legitimate concerns about the frequency and necessity of testing. But opting out isn't the solution; rather, she said, the response should be a careful examination of the tests.

Standards-based assessments, she said, "are the way we will know how all students are performing against a common benchmark and that is particularly important for low-income parents and for parents of color whose children for too long have been subject to low expectations."

For parents, the practicalities of opting out can be daunting, advocates concede.

United Opt Out National, an advocacy group that provides parents with guidance as they navigate the unchartered testing-refusal waters, has seen a marked increase in requests for help.

Peggy Robertson, a teacher and mother of two who lives in Centennial, Colo., and an administrator for United Opt Out National, said the group receives upwards of 100 emails a day seeking advice. The group, which is hosting a national conference in Denver on March 28 to mobilize anti-testing advocates, has volunteers in 27 states to assist parents. Ms. Robertson said parents face intimidating tactics from school and district administrators seeking to keep students in their seats for the tests. Parents also have been told that schools could lose funding and have their reputations damaged if too many students opt out.

"They so desperately need us to take these tests," Ms. Robertson said of district and school administrators. "But the more they bully parents, the more parents refuse to take the tests."

Michael Bohr, a stay-at-home father of two in Sparta, N.J., and an organizer of an opt-out rally planned for March 29 in Port Jefferson Station, N.Y., said, "The politicians can't ignore us if we're not taking their tests. They have to respond to us."

Chicago Showdown

The most recent clash over parents' opt-out rights has taken place in Chicago, where a coalition of parents **began a testing boycott March 3**.

Chicago is replacing the ISAT with the Northwest Evaluation Association's Measures of Academic Progress assessment—known as the NWEA MAP test—which will be used for school and student assessments, promotions, and eligibility to competitive schools. While Chicago parent advocates call the ISAT obsolete, district and state officials say the test must be administered to comply with federal mandates. Illinois State Board of Education spokeswoman Mary Fergus said the **state's testing guidelines** have always been clear: Students who are present on test-taking days must be offered the assessment. If the student refuses the tests, he or she may sit quietly or read.

John Barker, Chicago's chief accountability officer, said in a phone interview that although he does not want to minimize parents' concerns, the magnitude of the issue has been "overstated." Mr. Barker said the district meets with parents on a bimonthly basis to address concerns regarding the proper balance between assessment and instructional time.

"Our CEO [Barbara Byrd-Bennett] and senior leadership team absolutely believe that assessment is an important tool to inform teacher practice and guide student achievement," Mr. Barker said.

Chicago parent activists admit that they are facing an uphill battle to calm parents' fears and dispel what they said are myths about testing requirements. Despite the highly-charged atmosphere surrounding the testing boycott, however, Julie Fain, an organizer with More Than a Score, a new coalition of Chicago-based parent advocacy groups opposed to testing, said anti-testing activists aren't the driving force behind opting out in the city.

"This is mostly parents who are seeing that their kids do not love school anymore," said Ms. Fain,

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the mother of two children, and who is married to Chicago Teachers Union vice president Jesse Sharkey. "They're seeing that testing is taking more resources and time away from authentic learning."

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