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COMMENTARY

The Power of Parents Is on Display in Opt-Outs

By **Rebecca Page Johnson**

The success of the current education reform movement [← Back to Story](#)

hinges on the compliance of millions of children who sit for annual accountability tests designed to rank their performance, and on the acquiescence of their schools and teachers to this vast public-policy experiment. At the start, parents seemed to be on board, or at least oblivious to the slow increase in testing that would be required under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. But as the frequency, duration, and failure rate of these exams grew with the implementation of federal programs such as Race to the Top and new teacher-performance reviews connected to multiple annual exams, the power of the parents and students to undo this policy turn became evident.

In states such as New York, **where test results are now linked to the job rating and security of local teachers**, parents are beginning to speak out and act up, as they see the impact of the examination culture on their schools' depth of curriculum, climate for students, and instructional effectiveness. The resistance to state-mandated tests has reached a breaking point in many districts.

In my research on this phenomenon, I am analyzing online parental discussion groups and public commentary on the growing movement in New York state, as well as nationally, to "opt out" of mandatory standardized testing. More and more, I am seeing disaffected parents who are both frustrated and alarmed by the outsize influence examination preparation and administration is having on their children's daily lives.

Some of the deepest concern is being expressed by **a movement of parents of special-needs children**. They describe taking the state tests as a humiliating ordeal for their children—one they must experience over and over again. As one parent put it in a Facebook post, "We already got his below-basic designation last year, why do I need to send him in again for six more days of testing to get that news again?" In later posts, the mother describes the amazing enrichment activities and individualized instruction that her son's classroom teacher has designed for him. She laments that none of this teacher's efforts,

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nor her son's subsequent re-engagement in school that they have produced, would be reflected by the state exam used to measure his teacher's performance. And hers is not an isolated story. Many other parents describe in various media their children's loss of enriching activities to test preparation.

Perhaps even more alarming, however, is the lack of intellectual engagement the tests have engendered among students. At one middle school this spring, one of my undergraduate student-teachers watched helplessly as about a quarter of the students in her cooperating teacher's class breezed through an 8th grade assessment by simply selecting (b) as the answer for every question, without even reading the text. The teacher encouraged the students to do their best, but as one responded: "I have failed this for the past two years. Why do you think I could pass it now? It's a waste of time." The student-teacher was shocked, but also aware that the classroom teacher could not force the student to try harder. While the exam scores would help dictate whether this teacher received a high enough ranking to keep her job, there would be no place to note the lack of student effort.

But we must remember this: Teachers, teaching assistants, school cafeteria workers, principals, athletic coaches, and others are all parents, too. They see in real time the distorting impact of testing. They do not have the power to stop it, nor to reduce the effect of test results on the rankings of their schools. They do, however, have the power as parents to prevent their own children from participating. And in their communities, at their dinner tables, or at family or neighborhood gatherings, they have the freedom to talk about what is happening. Although they are forbidden by law to discuss the contents of the test, they can share the stories of resistance, frustration, and defeat, as well as how the testing regime is changing the culture of their schools.

All too often in our national conversation about testing, the arguments boil down to an oversimplified set of opposites: One is either for testing or against it, for "rigor" or against it based on definition, for teacher accountability or against teacher-bashing, and so on and so on.

Yet, **as the opt-out movement gains steam nationwide**, parents are showing that they



—Jonathan Bouw for Education Week

INSIDE OPT-OUT

The Pushback Against Testing

This special collection of Commentaries 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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understand the fact that there are important details and meaningful nuances missing from the conversation. What does true accountability look like? Parents won't be easily fooled into accepting that the only path to it, as well as academic rigor and better teachers, is through what they see as a corporate testing regime that is highly prescriptive and punitive. If parents don't believe that the results of state tests reflect the true value of the schools they know and love, they have the power to stop participating in the process.



This power of parents to question the changing direction of school reform and to address the diminished sense of cohesion and effectiveness in our public school communities—in effect, the ability of parents and students to vote with their feet and walk out of the testing site—is what education policymakers must now heed.

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