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## Bush, Obama focus on standardized testing leads to 'opt-out' parents' movement

By [Lyndsey Layton](#), Published: April 14

A decade into the school accountability movement, pockets of resistance to standardized testing are sprouting up around the country, with parents and students opting out of the high-stakes tests used to evaluate schools and teachers.

From Seattle, where 600 high school students refused to take a standardized test in January, to Texas, where 86 percent of school districts say the tests are “strangling our public schools,” anti-testing groups argue that bubble exams have proliferated beyond reason, delivering more angst than benefits.

“Over the last couple of years, they’ve turned this one test into the all and everything,” said Cindy Hamilton, a 50-year-old mother of three in Florida who founded Opt Out Orlando in response to the annual Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, which starts again Monday. Her group is one of dozens of new organizations opposed to such testing.

The opt-out movement is nascent but growing, propelled by parents, students and some educators using social media to swap tips on ways to spurn the tests. They argue that the exams cause stress for young children, narrow classroom curricula, and, in the worst scenarios, have led to cheating because of the stakes involved — teacher compensation and job security.

Standardized testing is one of the most controversial aspects of the accountability movement that began in earnest in 2002 when President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act.

That law required public schools for the first time to test students annually in grades three through eight and once in high school. Schools were required to show steadily improving scores until all students tested proficient in math and reading by 2014, or face escalating sanctions. Civil rights groups, progressives and conservatives united behind the idea that testing would hold schools accountable for educating all students.

“If a test is done right . . . there is no more efficient, less expensive, no simpler way to get a snapshot of whether students are effectively learning,” said Sandy Kress, a Texas lawyer and former Bush aide who has been working on school accountability issues for 25 years and helped write No Child Left Behind.



“It should be a tool to understand where students are, where achievement gaps exist, provide diagnostic information to teachers and parents,” said Kress, who lobbies on behalf of Pearson, the education publisher that writes K-12 tests. “It’s one, objective piece of data that can push and assure quality.”

But too many school districts have gone overboard, he said.

“You’ve got drilling and benchmark testing every six weeks,” Kress said. “Clearly, there’s a lot of overtesting in a lot of places. It’s just awful, and it draws really negative reactions from parents, teachers and communities. Tests weren’t intended to be treated that way.”

Some say the Obama administration has pushed the stakes even higher through its Race to the Top program, which [encourages states to use the standardized test scores](#) to evaluate teachers. In some states, as much as half of a teacher’s job evaluation is now determined by student scores on standardized tests.

The resulting pressure is distorting education, anti-testing activists say.

They point to third-graders being coached on handling test anxiety, and 10-year-olds sent home for spring break with test prep materials. And they rail against the time devoted to bubble sheets, which can include weeks of practicing and several days of test-taking.

[Noa Rosinplotz](#), a D.C. public school sixth-grader with a Facebook [page](#) dedicated to standardized testing, drew national attention with a firsthand [critique of test-taking](#). She argued that school officials force her and other D.C. students to take a poorly designed test that includes questions that are either unanswerable or contain mistakes.

President Obama, whose policies might have helped fuel the testing explosion, also has suggested that standardized testing has spun out of control.

“What is true, though, is that we have piled on a lot of standardized tests on our kids,” Obama told a town hall at a D.C. middle school in 2011. “Too often what we’ve been doing is using these tests to punish students or to, in some cases, punish schools.”

The opt-out movement is relatively small, but it is hitting a nerve with many parents, said Maria Ferguson of the Center on Education Policy, a nonpartisan think tank associated with George Washington University.

“The sentiment behind it is more common than people realize,” Ferguson said.

Joshua P. Starr, Montgomery County’s school superintendent, has called for a three-year moratorium on federally required standardized testing, arguing that such tests have been the “wrong mechanism” for evaluating school success. Starr has said he is “vehemently” opposed to teacher evaluation mechanisms that “rely too heavily on individual student performance on the current state standardized tests.”

Protesters say they are not opposed to tests that measure learning and flag weaknesses or strengths. But they argue that the tests that have emerged in recent years don’t help individual students.

“It won’t tell me anything about him — we won’t even get the results until next year — but it’ll be used to directly assess his school and teachers,” said Pam Harbin of Pittsburgh, whose 10-year-old son is sitting out the state standardized tests this month. “This is not for the benefit of the student.”

But the tests do have value for school systems, said Linda Lane, the superintendent of Pittsburgh's public schools.

"It's one of the ways — not the only way — but one way we measure our progress as a district," said Lane, who expects about 20 families in her system to opt out of testing. "Certainly, at the classroom level, we believe it's helpful for teachers to know how students are doing."

Lane said protesters are overstating the impact of standardized tests.

"People say we've narrowed the curriculum, that all we're teaching is reading and math, and that is absolutely not true," Lane said.

Critics say at the most extreme, the drive for high scores has led to cheating scandals like those alleged in the [District](#), Philadelphia and Atlanta, where the former superintendent and 34 educators were indicted last month on criminal charges related to test tampering and changing student answer sheets to ensure correct answers.

Teachers in 18 District classrooms at 11 schools [cheated on such tests](#) last year, according to a report Friday from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education. The report found test-tampering that included providing students with answers, reading test questions aloud and encouraging students to reread specific questions.

In Sunrise, Fla., talk about the state's standardized test began when Jared Eckert, now 13, was in kindergarten — even though the test isn't administered until third grade, said his mother, Roseanne.

Jared is opting out because his family thinks the emphasis on the state exam has warped the classroom experience.

"By the time he was in fifth grade, he was being denied recess and physical education and doing hours of work sheets at night because there was so much pressure for the students to pass," Roseanne Eckert said.

She is still figuring out how Jared will spend the four days this month when his peers are filling in multiple-choice bubbles on answer sheets. Reading would be a good idea, she said. "Maybe Henry David Thoreau," she said, referring to the author of "Civil Disobedience."

Earlier this month, several hundred people protested outside the U.S. Department of Education under the banner "United Opt Out National," calling for test policy changes.

Because regulations differ from state to state, parents who want to opt out use various methods. In Pennsylvania, for example, parents are citing a state rule that allows opting out of testing based on religious objections. In Florida, parents are relying on regulations that allow for alternative assessments, such as a portfolio of schoolwork or SAT scores. Some school districts and state education departments have tried to discourage test boycotts, leading parents to swap information via Facebook pages and Web sites.

"Opting out is the way to truly, truly get the discussion going," said Marjie Crist, a lawyer in Mount Lebanon, Pa., who pulled her 8-year-old daughter, Rosemary, from state testing that began last week.

Students opting out of the testing would not face individual ramifications, but if students do so in large groups, the boycotts could affect a specific school's standing under federal law, which requires 95 percent of each school's

student population to take the tests.

In attaching consequences to standardized exams, policymakers adopted ideas from the corporate world, where success is rewarded and failure is punished. The theory was that students would have incentives to learn, [educators would be motivated to teach](#) and academic achievement would improve.

But under No Child Left Behind, a significant number of schools did not see their test scores increase, and the federal government labeled them as “failing.” That led educators and political leaders to complain that the law’s requirements were unrealistic.

Since 2011, the Obama administration issued [waivers](#) to exempt 34 states and the District from some of the more onerous requirements of No Child Left Behind.

Still, the testing has continued.

State spending on standardized testing grew from \$552 million in 2001 to \$1.7 billion in 2012, according to surveys performed by the Pew Center on the States and the Brookings Institution.

When the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette printed a recent [op-ed](#) by Kathy Newman in which she explained why her 9-year-old son, Jacob, is opting out of the state test, she got e-mails from parents asking how to follow suit.

Newman, an associate professor of English at Carnegie Mellon University, said she decided to opt out after catching herself shouting at Jacob, frustrated that he wasn’t concentrating on his test prep materials.

“I don’t want to protect my son from challenges,” Newman said. “But I object to all this pressure for a single test that’s going to decide the fate of his school teacher’s salary.”

In Texas, where 10,000 people rallied in February against education cuts and testing, the House of Representatives passed a bill to reduce the number of standardized tests required before high school graduation from 15 to five.

Kress worries that the backlash against testing will stall the country’s progress in forcing schools to educate all children.

“This is about way more than testing,” Kress said. “The question is whether we’re willing to hold ourselves accountable. The question is whether there are consequences for adults and whether we’re serious about all children meeting standards. This is a test of our culture and whether we’re prepared to see these aspirations to reality. I worry that we’re not going to pass this test.”

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