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## Opt-Out Movement About More Than Tests, Advocates Say

Thousands of students are refusing to take annual Common Core-aligned exams, even when the consequences may be severe.



Sixth-grader Monique Soto takes part in a practice session while preparing for the PARCC tests at Fort Logan Northgate School in Sheridan, Colorado.

By [Allie Bidwell](#) | March 10, 2015 | 5:36 p.m. EDT

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Tens of thousands of parents and students nationwide are engaging in civil disobedience by refusing to participate in federally mandated standardized tests, as states are fully deploying new exams aligned to the Common Core State Standards for the first time.

While the opt-out movement has gained steam from some looking to protest the controversial academic standards and what they say is an overemphasis on testing in schools, some of its leaders say it's about more than just those two things.

"Opt-out is not an anti-testing movement. This is a movement to reclaim and do what's right for kids in public schools," says Tim Slekar, a leader of the United Opt Out movement in Wisconsin and dean of the school of education at Edgewood College. "This is a movement to restore real learning."

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Spending on standards and tests, Slekar says, has taken away from funding music and arts programs, for example, and could be better allocated elsewhere.

"Why are the standards – the first ones we set – not, 'All kids will come to school not hungry, not sick and with access to books?'" Slekar says. "Those are some great standards, but yet those standards we're not allowed to go after."

"A place for testing is when it is given back to the classroom teacher," he adds. "Politicians have no business of being in the testing, teaching and learning business. They're the ones to blame for the fact that we have an increasing achievement gap ... They're responsible for the absolute disaster we see in some of our poorer public schools."

The number of students who have chosen not to take the tests has varied, from [a relative handful](#) who have opted out to [hundreds](#) who have walked out in protest.

Widespread protests against the Common Core-aligned tests [began last month](#), when states began administering exams created by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) consortium. The other Common Core testing consortium, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), will begin administering exams in about 20 states later this month. Parents, teachers and school leaders have expressed concern that the tests may be too difficult or time-consuming, or that their schools' technology might not be up to snuff for what the tests require.

For many, the jury is still out on both the Common Core standards and the linked exams. Teach Plus, a nonprofit focused on placing effective teachers in urban schools, on Tuesday [released a survey](#) of more than 1,000 teachers in Boston, Chicago, Memphis, Nashville and the District of Columbia who evaluated sample PARCC questions. More than three-quarters – 79 percent – of teachers said the test items were better than what their states used to have, but there were mixed results on whether they were grade-appropriate or too challenging.

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"As a teacher, we know developmentally some kids might not learn to read until the second grade," says Peggy Robertson, a former teacher and an administrator of the [national United Opt Out group](#). "It's not like when a kid can't walk you push them harder to walk. You wait and allow them to walk as they're ready. Under Common Core, if you're not reading at a particular level in kindergarten ... you're already being told you're a failure. When you place these artificial standards on children and force them to comply to it, you set them up to hate learning and to hate reading."

Parents, too, are skeptical of the benefits of standardized testing. A 2014 PDK/Gallup survey showed that [68 percent of public school parents](#) said they do not believe standardized tests are helpful to teachers. Parents were more supportive, though, of the idea of using tests to make decisions about grade-level promotions, graduation requirements and whether to award college credit.

At the same time, Congress is working to reauthorize the No Child Left Behind Act, which established annual standardized testing as a staple in public schools. Although the sweeping education law governs many different aspects of how federal funds are used in schools nationwide, the role of testing has been a major point of contention.

No Child Left Behind requires public school students to be tested once annually in math and English in third through eighth grade, and again in each subject once in high school. In total, federal mandates account for 17 tests students take throughout their academic careers: seven for English, seven for math and three grade-span tests (once each in elementary, middle and high school) for science.

Many state departments of education point to No Child Left Behind and state policies when discussing why they feel it's important that students are tested each year. But states' own policies on whether they allow students to opt out of annual testing vary widely.

Some states, such as Utah and California, very clearly allow students to opt out of annual testing for any reason, according to a research brief published by the Education Commission of the States. Others, such as Oregon and Pennsylvania, allow students to be excused from testing to accommodate religious beliefs.

But in states where testing opt-outs aren't allowed, guidance from departments of education "run along a spectrum from silence on the issue to state guidance or policies clearly prohibiting opt-outs," the brief says.

**[ALSO: [No Child Left Behind Debate Moves From Testing to Federal Oversight](#)]**

"Given the confusion and quite varied information floating around out there, it would be probably to states' advantage to at least be clear what the policy is," says Julie Rowland, a researcher for the Education Commission of the States and an author of the research brief. "Many are moving in that direction."

But even when the opt-out policy is clear, it doesn't seem to be stopping some families and students.

The Illinois State Board of Education in October sent a letter to parents who requested that their students be excused from testing, stating that skipping the tests would be breaking the law and that teachers and administrators who refused to give the exams would face "local disciplinary action and possible action by the State Educator Preparation and Licensure Board."

The letter said districts could adopt their own policies on how to handle students who refuse to take the tests.

"A district that allows students to opt out of the state's required test would directly violate both federal and state law," the letter said. "Moreover, districts face lower public school recognition status and threaten their receipt of state and federal funds if they break the law and do not administer the PARCC assessment."

Illinois State Superintendent of Education Christopher Koch this month also [released a letter](#) emphasizing the importance of the tests. But some state lawmakers have introduced a bill that would allow parents to decide whether their children take the tests.

The Ohio Department of Education has also clearly outlined the potential consequences of students not taking annual assessments: Third-grade students could be retained due to a state reading policy, high school students could risk graduating because the annual tests are part of the state's graduation requirements, and English Language Learners could be delayed or prevented from leaving the program.

**[MORE: [Study: High Standardized Test Scores Don't Translate to Better Cognition](#)]**

Ohio and Colorado – which also had previously said there would be consequences for refusing to take the tests – have backed off and said they won't penalize districts where large numbers of students skip them.

Regardless, the possible penalties haven't stopped students

"Opt-out is an act of civil disobedience. The one way we have to vote for saving public schools is by refusing these tests," Robertson says. "The truth is it doesn't matter [what the state policy is]. It's an act

stating we reclaim our public schools. Opt-out allows us to vote in that way."

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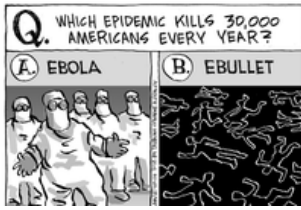
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