

**SPECIAL ISSUE**  
**Anti-Standardization and Testing Opt-Out Movements in Education:  
Resistance, Disputes and Transformation**

education policy analysis  
archives

A peer-reviewed, independent,  
open access, multilingual journal



Arizona State University

Volume 30 Number 136

September 6, 2022

ISSN 1068-2341

**The Battle for Whole-Child Approaches: Examining the  
Motivations, Strategies and Successes of a Parents'  
Resistance Movement Against a Performance Regime in a  
Local Norwegian School System**

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**Citation:** Skedsmo, G., & Camphuijsen, M. K. (2022). The battle for whole-child approaches: Examining the motivations, strategies and successes of a parents' resistance movement against a performance regime in a local Norwegian school system. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 30(136). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.30.6452> This article is part of the special issue *Testing Opt-out Movements: Resistance, Disputes and Transformation*, guest edited by Javier Campos-Martínez, Alejandra Falabella, Jessica Holloway, and Diego Santori.

**Abstract:** In different parts of the world, social movements led by parents, educators, and professional organizations have emerged that resist educational standardisation and use of

Journal website: <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/>  
Facebook: /EPAAA  
Twitter: @epaa\_aape

Manuscript received: 19/7/2021  
Revisions received: 21/1/2022  
Accepted: 9/4/2022

(high stakes) standardised tests, and that push for educational change. With the aim of extending empirical coverage of protest movements in non-English speaking countries, this study examines a Norwegian parental movement called *Foreldreopprør i Osloskolen* (FiO) (in English: Parental Uprising in the Oslo School). We draw on exploratory research based on in-depth interviews with initiators and members of FiO ( $n=8$ ), as well as documentary and press analysis and an examination of social media sites. The analysis sheds light on the emergence and nature of the movement, parents' main motivations and discourses, as well as the movements' collective action strategies and main successes. The findings highlight how rather than opting-out their children from standardised tests, some Norwegian parents chose to opt-out their children from public schools, while continuing their fight for whole-child approaches in public education.

**Keywords:** social movements; parents; standardised testing; management by objectives and results; educational governance; Norway

### **La batalla por los enfoques integrales: Examinando las motivaciones, estrategias y éxitos de un movimiento de resistencia parental contra un régimen basado en el rendimiento académico en un sistema escolar local noruego**

**Resumen:** En diferentes partes del mundo han surgido movimientos sociales liderados por padres y madres, docentes y organizaciones profesionales que se resisten a la estandarización educativa y al uso de pruebas estandarizadas (con altas consecuencias), y que presionan por el cambio educativo. Con el objetivo de ampliar la cobertura empírica de los movimientos de protesta en países de habla no inglesa, este estudio examina un movimiento de padres noruegos llamado *Foreldreopprør i Osloskolen* (FiO) (en castellano: levantamiento de padres y madres en la escuela de Oslo). Nos basamos en una investigación exploratoria basada en entrevistas en profundidad con los promotores y los miembros del movimiento FiO ( $n=8$ ), así como en el análisis de documentos y de prensa y en la exploración de sus redes sociales. El análisis arroja luz sobre el surgimiento y la naturaleza del movimiento, las principales motivaciones y discursos de los padres y madres, así como las estrategias de acción colectiva del movimiento y sus principales éxitos. Los resultados ponen de relieve que, en lugar de excluir a sus hijos de las pruebas estandarizadas, algunos padres noruegos optaron por sacar a sus hijos de las escuelas públicas, mientras seguían luchando por enfoques integrales en la educación pública.

**Palabras-clave:** movimientos sociales; padres; pruebas estandarizadas; gestión por objetivos y resultados; gobernanza educativa; Noruega

### **A batalha por abordagens abrangentes: Examinando as motivações, estratégias e sucessos de um movimento de resistência dos pais contra um regime de desempenho em um sistema escolar norueguês local**

**Resumo:** Em diferentes partes do mundo, surgiram movimentos sociais liderados por pais, educadores e organizações profissionais que resistem à padronização educacional e ao uso de testes padronizados (de elevado impacto) e que pressionam mudanças educacionais. Com o objetivo de estender a cobertura empírica sobre movimentos de protesto em países que não falam inglês, este estudo examina um movimento parental norueguês chamado *Foreldreopprør i Osloskolen* (FiO) (em português: Pais pela melhoria da escola em Oslo). Baseámo-nos em pesquisa exploratória partindo de entrevistas em profundidade com iniciadores e membros da FiO ( $n=8$ ), desenvolvemos análise documental e de imprensa e analisamos sites de mídia social. A análise identifica o surgimento e a natureza do movimento, as principais motivações e discursos dos pais, bem como as estratégias de ação

coletiva e seus principais sucessos. As descobertas evidenciam como, em vez de excluir os filhos dos testes padronizados, alguns pais noruegueses optaram por retirar os filhos das escolas públicas, enquanto mantém a luta por abordagens mais inclusivas na educação pública.

**Palavras-chave:** movimentos sociais; pais; testes padronizados; gestão por objetivos e resultados; governança em educação; Noruega

### **The Battle for Whole-Child Approaches: Examining the Motivations, Strategies and Successes of a Parents' Resistance Movement Against a Performance Regime in a Local Norwegian School System**

Following rising concerns about the efficiency, effectiveness and equity of education systems, policymakers around the globe have initiated education reform processes. Three policy principles have become particularly popular in the attempt to modernise education systems and improve performance: decentralisation, learning standards and accountability (Ball et al., 2017; Verger et al., 2019). In practice, these principles tend to imply that greater decision-making power for educational management and daily processes is awarded to lower government levels and schools, while simultaneously, these actors are increasingly subject to performance monitoring and held accountable for the extent to which they achieve centrally defined and measurable learning standards. Standardised performance tests have become a central steering device in monitoring success and failure and in holding actors accountable for performance, attaching individual and/or institutional consequences to achievements (Au, 2007).

Regardless of the global trend towards adopting or strengthening standardised curricula and test-based accountability systems, such reform efforts have met considerable critique and opposition. A significant body of research has highlighted how these policies can reinforce traditional, uniform and exam-oriented teaching practices, foster teaching to the test, and increase curricular uniformity and reduction (e.g. Au, 2007, 2011; Falabella, 2014). A number of negative effects on student inclusion and equity have also been identified, as well as on educators' identity and job satisfaction (Au, 2011; Falabella, 2014; Holloway, 2020; Verger & Parcerisa, 2017). Rather than claiming that such effects can be reduced or prevented by 'correct incentives', critical sociologists have argued that such effects are inherent to this policy approach, which not only changes school practices and triggers 'secondary effects' but also transforms 'school life, ethics and teaching profession subjectivities in complex and deeply-rooted ways' (Falabella, 2014, p. 1).

Beyond sparking an academic debate on the benefits and disadvantages of this policy approach, social movements led by parents, educators, teacher unions and professional organisations have emerged that resist increasing standardisation and use of (high-stakes) standardised tests and that push for educational change. One of the most renowned examples of such a movement is the protest movement that emerged in the United States following the widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards, as well as the accompanying standardised tests (Mitra et al., 2016; Pizmony-Levy & Green-Saraisky, 2016). In challenging test-based accountability measures, parents and caregivers across the country have opted their children out of federally mandated standardised assessments. In recent years, the opt-out movement in the United States has been classified as 'one of the more highly visible protest movements in education politics during the past five years' (Green-Saraisky & Pizmony-Levy, 2020, p. 3).

While the American opt-out movement has received significant political and research attention (e.g. Brody, 2015; Hursch, 2013; Kirylo, 2018; Mitra et al., 2016; Pizmony-Levy & Green-

Saraisky, 2016, 2017; Wang, 2017), opposition against test-based accountability and educational standardisation has also emerged in other parts of the world, including Catalonia (Collet-Sabe & Ball, 2020), England (Coughlan, 2016), Russia (O’Flynn, 2009), South Korea (Strauss, 2014) and Norway (Bjordal & Haugen, 2021). Nonetheless, regardless of the global spread of organised resistance against educational standardisation, research focusing on such movements has remained fairly limited. As such, we still know little about educational social movements outside of the United States that respond to and challenge standardisation and standardised testing.

With the aim of extending empirical coverage of protest movements against educational standardisation, this study examines a Norwegian parental movement called *Foreldreopprør i Osloskolen* (in English: Parental Uprising in the Schools of Oslo), which has initiated resistance against standardised testing and standardised curricula and has organised for educational change. Although *Foreldreopprør i Osloskolen* (hereafter: FiO) originated in Norway’s capital city, Oslo, the movement has received national attention following its members participating in debates on television, radio, newspapers and social media. Over time, the movement has gained over 4,000 followers on Facebook. By relying on social movement theory, we attempt to gain a deeper understanding of (a) who is involved in the movement and why (main motivations, reasons and discourses); (b) what characterizes the socio-historical context in which the movement emerged and its development, goals and action strategies; and (c) what are the movement’s main successes and achievements in challenging dominant local policies and practices. The analysis follows a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2003) and relies on in-depth interviews with initiators and members of the FiO ( $n = 8$ ), a document and press analysis and an examination of social media sites.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we briefly explain the Norwegian educational context, focusing specifically on the adoption and development of standardised testing and test-based accountability in Norway. Subsequently, we present a review of previous research on social movements that resist standardisation and testing policies, followed by the study’s theoretical framework. Thereafter, we outline the data and methodology and present our main findings. The paper ends with a discussion and conclusion.

## Contextual Background

The Norwegian welfare state is based on a social democratic ideology (Esping-Andersen, 1990). The country is characterised by high levels of public social spending, and public services are provided directly by state and local governments (Telhaug et al., 2006). The 356 municipalities are in charge of governing their school systems and by legislation they have specific responsibilities for a range of areas, including quality assurance and development (Education Act, 2006, 2020). Norway’s comprehensive school model seeks to ensure equal opportunity for all children, irrespective of gender, geographical location or socioeconomic or ethnic background (Blossing et al., 2014). The Education Act ensures children’s legal right to education, for instance, the right to adaptive teaching according to their abilities (Education Act, 2009) and the schools’ responsibility to collaborate with parents in the best manner for the child’s development (Education Act, 2010). At the level of compulsory education, only five percent of the school-aged population is enrolled in private schools. School choice is generally restricted, although local exceptions have been found (Haugen, 2019).

Over the last two decades, a shift in school governance has occurred from input to output governance (Skedsmo, 2011). Education policies have increasingly emphasised performance monitoring, accountability and expectations around data use to foster school improvement. While national tests have become a central steering device for examining the extent to which centrally defined learning goals are met, they have long been considered controversial (Tveit, 2014). It took until the turn of the millennium, when concerns arose about learning deficiencies and inequalities, to

reach a political agreement on the need to introduce national testing and establish a national quality assessment system. However, the hurry with which national tests in reading, writing, numeracy and English were implemented in 2004, as well as the decision to publish the test results on a government website, gave rise to significant societal criticism (Camphuijsen et al., 2020). During the first test rounds, lower- and upper-secondary school students and the School Student Union boycotted the tests (e.g. Hølleland, 2007), while media debates on national testing were dominated by highly critical messages about the validity, reliability, usefulness and fairness of the test system (Camphuijsen & Levatino, 2021). In 2006, the administration of the tests was paused as a consequence of an evaluation that demonstrated the lack of validity and reliability in particular (Lie et al., 2005), and efforts were undertaken to improve the quality of the tests. In 2007, national tests in reading, numeracy and English were re-introduced in compulsory education, this time at the start, rather than at the end of the school year. This decision was made in an attempt to increase the formative value of the tests.

While the introduction of national standardized testing has implied that Norwegian teachers, school leaders and local authorities are increasingly held accountable for the extent to which they achieve centrally defined learning goals, the Norwegian test-based accountability system remains characterised by a relative absence of material consequences, such as financial incentives or sanctions attached to test results (Camphuijsen et al., 2020; Skedsmo & Mausethagen, 2016). Nonetheless, due to high levels of municipal discretion, significant variation exists in local governing regimes and accountability practices (Proitz et al., 2019). As such, while policy discourse at the central level remains characterized by trust in the profession, and by limited use of ‘hard’ consequences attached to test results, in some of the larger municipalities, including Oslo, local governments have established hierarchical accountability systems that rely on both national and local standardized tests, as well as on performance contracts and financial incentives attached to results (Elstad, 2009; Haugen, 2019; Skedsmo & Møller, 2016). In this regard, Oslo municipality has gained national attention, as it has taken the lead in stimulating debates about testing and achievement scores. One of the political parties, the Conservative Party, claims ownership of its trademark, promoting the Oslo School as the Conservative Party’s school (in Norwegian: Høyreskolen) and, by this, forming ideological conflicts in the ways by which schools are governed.

In recent years, different groups of actors, including teachers, parents and journalists, have expressed concern about the ways in which (local) authorities have governed schools. Research has also shown a growing sense of compliance among school principals and teachers towards expectations from local educational authorities (e.g. Bjordal & Haugen, 2021; Møller, 2009). Over the last decade, several cases have been reported in the media in which school principals and teachers have been silenced by their superiors after criticizing aspects of the school system publicly. In Oslo, one specific case, often referred to as the ‘Malkenes-case’, received lots of media attention nationally and finally led to a public hearing about constitutional rights and the practices of freedom of expression in the school system on 22 May 2018<sup>1</sup>. The FiO emerged in 2015 as a major force in the public debate about testing, performance pressure, standardisation of classroom practices and consequences for the wellbeing of children, advocating for change.

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Malkenes, former teacher in upper secondary school in Oslo, was awarded the Fritt Ord Tribute 2018 for his critical focus on the lack of freedom of expression culture in the Oslo school system. The [Fritt Ord Foundation](#) aims to protect and promote freedom of expression and the environment for freedom of expression in Norway, especially by encouraging lively debate and through the courageous use of free speech.

## Literature Review

With regard to the emergence of social movements that challenge educational standardisation, previous research shows that recent educational reforms have sparked growing dissatisfaction among key stakeholders, including educators and parents, which seems to contribute to a crisis of legitimacy or to an 'ideological break' (Behrent, 2016, p. 54). More specifically, studies highlight how activists have expressed concerns about the impact of high-stakes testing on children's emotional and physical wellbeing and on their self-esteem, emphasising the exorbitant anxiety among children that high-stakes testing generates (Brody, 2015; Lipman, 2011; Stitzlein, 2020). Existing studies have also emphasised the adoption of practices with harmful effects on education quality, such as 'teach to the test' practices among teachers and curriculum narrowing (Lipman, 2011). In this way, educational standardisation is said to contribute to the de-professionalisation of teachers (Stitzlein, 2020). Other concerns expressed by activists relate to the role of corporations in testing (Stitzlein, 2020) and the excessive amount of taxpayer funding spent administering tests (Brody, 2015). Finally, activists have argued that test-based accountability reforms have harmed disadvantaged communities and students, emphasising that their fight is one for social justice (Au, 2010; Dianis et al., 2015). Notably, various studies have pointed out that many activists not simply or only oppose high-stakes testing, but are often concerned about broader aspects of education reform (Pizmony-Levy & Green-Saraisky, 2016), including the neoliberal approach to education (Lipman, 2011) and the increase of privatisation and corporate influence in education (Hursh et al., 2020).

In advocating for change, anti-standardisation movements appear to use a range of strategies, including community rallies and marches, as well as lobbying (Neill, 2016). Moreover, to share information, counter narratives and coordinate action, many activists use social networks, parent meetings, public fora, film showings, and, in particular, social media (Neill, 2016; Rogers & Brefeld, 2015). Commonly, activists attempt to build alliances with other stakeholders and education-focused groups, but also with local community members and civil rights organisations. Collaboration appears to be key to the success of the movement, as is respectful attention from the mainstream media (Neill, 2016). Nonetheless, studies have also identified a number of obstacles that seem to hinder the success of anti-standardisation movements, including repression or bullying from system administrators, superintendents and principals, a lack of resources or information and the 'residual belief that high-stakes testing will produce educational benefits', particularly for those most disadvantaged (Neill, 2016, p. 23). Regardless of such obstacles, various studies have reported the victories of anti-standardisation movements, such as changes in legislation surrounding standardised testing (Neill, 2016).

## Theoretical Framework

In examining contentious politics and policy processes, social movements have increasingly been recognised as key constructs that serve an important political function in seeking to achieve social change through mobilisation and collective action. Social movements have been defined as 'networks of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organisations, engaged in political or cultural conflicts, on the basis of shared collective identities' (Diani, 1992, p. 8). Since the late 1960s, multiple theoretical approaches have emerged that focus on the onset and development of social movements, as well as on their members and impact (Caren, 2007). One prominent theoretical approach that offers an explanation for the conditions under which social movements emerge and how they mobilise, as well as the movement's ability to influence public policies, is the political process theory (Caren, 2007; McAdam, 1982). This approach emphasises that social movements do not emerge or act in a vacuum, but rather in particular geographical, political

and socio-historical contexts that both shape their development and action strategies. While political process theory emerged as a critique of other theoretical perspectives, over time, it has incorporated elements of some of these perspectives, including resource mobilization theory (Caren, 2007).

This theoretical synthesis, which emphasises political opportunities, mobilising structures and framing processes, forms a useful theoretical resource with which to examine and understand the onset and development of social movements, as well as their potential success. In our analysis, we first focus on the characteristics of the parents involved, their motivation and reasons to start or join the movement and their discourses to frame their criticism and arguments for change. The personal stories of the interviewees form the basis for the analysis of the sociohistorical context in which the movement emerged. The movement's further development, action strategies and successes have to be seen as responses to an ongoing public debate and to changes in the political environment. Finally, we discuss the findings related to elements in the theoretical synthesis described above: political opportunities, mobilising structures and framing processes.

## **Data and Methodology**

Our analysis relies on different data sources. To gain a deeper understanding of the FiO members' views and rationales behind establishing the movement, we conducted in-depth interviews with initiators and members of the parents' movement. Furthermore, as background to the interviews, we traced and examined press articles and documents produced by the movement, including commentary articles, which provided us with a more general understanding of the movement, its arguments and action strategies. Finally, considering the significance of social media sites and, in particular, Facebook in the FiO movement, we examined the movement's popular Facebook page. This analysis contributed to a better understanding of the main debates and controversies surrounding the movement.

In total, eight interviews were conducted between May and July 2021.<sup>2</sup> In line with previous research on social movements, our study is based on a nonprobability sample of members affiliated with the FiO movement. Specifically, the interviewees were selected by means of purposeful sampling and snowball sampling. Four of the interviewees provided one to two names of other members, using various degrees of active involvement of the member as a criterion. During the interviews, a semi-structured interview script was used to allow flexibility. The interview script contained questions about the members' motivations to join the movement and their role within the movement, as well as goals, strategies and major accomplishments of the movement, and implications, support and criticism. All interviews, which lasted one hour on average, were conducted via Zoom and audio recorded with a digital recorder. Afterwards, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymised according to data protection regulations. To protect the confidentiality of the interviewees, data derived from personal stories were not included in the presentation of the results.

In addition to the interviews, we collected press articles by relying on the media archive of Retriever, which contains original editions of Norwegian national, regional and local newspapers. To perform our search, we used the name of the movement as a keyword. We subsequently downloaded and read all the articles.

During the first stage of the analysis, we thematically coded the data material, applying content analysis, which helped identify and interpret patterns of meaning within the data. Our analytical approach is inspired by narrative analysis to identify the overall motives, intentions and

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<sup>2</sup> The study aligns to the ethical guidelines of the national ethical committee, the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before inclusion.

strategies of the movement. Drawing on Bakhtin (1984), we recognise that any individual voice is actually a dialogue between multiple voices, which implies that we consider the story about the emergence of the FiO and its accomplishments to be co-constructed. As such, each interviewee adds to what becomes the emerging story (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). At the same time, we are aware that the stories told in the interviews are composed of fragments of previous stories told in other settings (Bakhtin, 1984). In our analysis, we combined interview data with data from public sources (social media and newspaper articles) produced by the FiO. The analysis of the interview data formed a basis for selecting the public sources, as they appeared to represent support or criticism that was followed by responses from the movement. According to the interview reports, the content presented publicly by the movement was discussed and agreed upon by the members. As such, our analysis draws on sources representing official statements and collective memory and interview data that include individual views and reflections on the movement and its strategies. Finally, as researchers, we take part in the co-construction of the story guided by research questions, theoretical perspectives and previous research in this area (cf. Riessman, 2008).

## Findings

### **Characteristics of the Parents Involved and the Movements' Main Motivations and Discourses**

The social movement FiO emerged in 2015 in the city of Oslo. On 10 March 2015, the movement initiators established a Facebook group, which quickly gained popularity. Members of the movement expressed fierce criticism towards management by objectives and results, which has been the dominant way of governing schools in Oslo since the turn of the millennium. In particular, the movement has challenged the numerous learning goals that teachers must address, as well as the strong focus on basic skills and the number of tests and assessments in schools. As members of the movement explained in an article published in a national newspaper, 'FiO is positive towards tests that promote learning, but believes the scope of testing that does not promote learning has gone completely off the rails' (Fladberg, 2015).

The interviews and document analysis reveal that the core of FiO's critique is targeted at the dominant school governing approach in Oslo rather than at individual teachers. In particular, it is highlighted how administrative pressure to address learning objectives and obtain high results seems to result in 'performance-oriented drilling' and instrumental classroom activities, focused on achieving learning goals and assessing and improving students' performance in deficit-oriented ways. Such practices are perceived as conflicting with what the FiO considers to be good and worthwhile teaching and learning, as well as with the curriculum and principles of adaptive teaching stated in the Education Act:

The way the Oslo School is managed, it goes in the opposite direction and is old-fashioned. Fragmented learning objectives and frequent testing provide surface learning instead of deep learning. (Fladberg, 2015)

In other words, in their critique, the movement focuses on how a strict and narrow test regime closes, rather than opens, doors to the future for children and youth. To prepare children for the future, the FiO desires a broader education for their children, one that focuses on developing the whole child according to the general part of the curriculum. Specific emphasis is placed on how schools need to allocate more time for in-depth learning and the development of skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, problem-solving and self-regulation, as well as social and emotional skills. Notably, the movement uses the productivity and economic competitiveness of the nation to



argue against testing, which is similar to the argument used by national authorities to introduce standardised testing in the first place (Camphuijsen et al., 2020). Specifically, the argument put forward by FiO is that other skills and competencies beyond those that can be tested are needed for a society to be economically competitive. This argument highlights how resistance to dominant discourses is, in important ways, shaped by prevailing discourses rather than something that is easily detached.

FiO criticises the top-down control mechanisms introduced by the school administration and claims that the practices employed by schools in Oslo are not in line with the Education Act. Consequently, they advocate for reducing the use of tests and performance monitoring and for 'bringing the teachers back in', as the following quotation illustrates:

This regime is strictly governed by politicians and bureaucrats. Decisions regarding how students can improve their learning in the best possible way have to be made by the teachers since they are the professional experts who are also closest to the students and know what they need. (Interviewee 5)

As such, despite the movement expressing fierce criticism against the testing regime, it does not simply oppose standardised testing. Key actors in the movement emphasise that the instrumental focus in classroom activities relates to elements introduced as part of New Public Management reforms, such as leadership contracts that include performance targets and performance-based pay, standardisation of teaching and reduced autonomy for teachers to make professional decisions to accommodate children's needs. One parent described the following:

Teachers have always had leeway to decide on teaching methods. I was shocked when the principal stated in the parents' meeting that, here, the teachers do not have this autonomy. He compared teaching with a surgeon using standardised medical procedures and said that you would not like to have a surgeon experimenting with the methods during surgery. (Interviewee 5)

Moreover, the parents accentuate the negative consequences of the governing system in terms of key actors being accused of acting disloyally if they do not align their practices with system requirements. As such, they explained that they raised their voices not only on behalf of the children, but also on behalf of teachers who were unable to speak up due to the sanctions they feared if they did:

Teachers often contacted us. They said it is great that you do this because we cannot. Some teachers even said that they were afraid of clicking 'like' on our posts on Facebook in case the principal or someone from the school administration would see it. (Interviewee 1)

Members of the FiO considered it both their 'right' and 'duty' to raise their voice, as they clarified in a commentary article in a main national newspaper (*Aftenposten*):

We speak up when the comprehensive school is not in the best interests of all children. It is both our right and our duty as parents to notify when a school system is detrimental to children's development and self-image. (...). We criticise a school system that unilaterally emphasises pressure to learn and measurable skills and that does not safeguard the school's broad societal mandate. (Brodin & Gjerdåker, 2018)

Three types of stories emerged from the interviews that explain why parents joined the FiO. The first type of story includes parents who experienced that their children were anxious on Thursday evenings due to the weekly test on Friday covering that week's 20–30 learning goals. The students were also asked to assess their performance using smiling or sad faces, which were discussed and

compared with the teachers' assessments. The interviews revealed that many children purposefully chose a sad face each week as they were afraid of assessing themselves more positively than the teacher, contributing to feelings of defeat. Moreover, in a newspaper article published in *Dagsavisen*, the FiO highlights the case of students 'who think they are ruining it for others, because they know they are pulling down the average on the national tests'. In this newspaper article, the interviewed member of the FiO explained: 'It is a heavy burden to carry on small shoulders. That is not how it should be' (Fladberg, 2015). The interviews revealed how the anxiety that the students experienced also appeared as stomach pain and headaches, and they were unwilling to go to school. The second type of story questions specific teaching and classroom activities related to assessment, such as devoting two weeks for the children to practice for the diagnostic tests, even though the tests were originally intended to reveal whether the children experienced learning difficulties. The interviewees revealed that during this period, subjects such as sports and arts were removed from the lesson plan. The third type of story expresses parents' general unrest with highly standardised activities that were prioritised and allocated substantial amounts of instructional time. Even if their children seemed to do well, they questioned the decisions and priorities communicated but without being able to pinpoint why they felt like this.

In response, many of the parents raised their concerns with the teachers. Nonetheless, many were told by teachers that this was the practice of the school and that the parents had to take it up with the school principal. When expressing their worries in conversations with the principal, the parents were met with explanations, such as 'This is how the practice is in schools of Oslo'. Some of them were told to raise their issues with the director of the school administration or engage themselves politically if they wanted to change the system. All interviewees expressed that they were very surprised by the reactions from the local school and that they felt their concerns were not taken seriously:

I have always been an engaged parent and I really thought the school principal would listen to me and try to do something about this. At the end of the conversation, he even made me the suggestion, 'Maybe your child does not fit in here?' (Interviewee 1)

Several interviewees described that they had 'fought lonely battles' for a long time before joining the FiO, and looking back, they think they were naive to believe that the principals would listen to them. Three out of eight interviewed parents chose a private school for their children. Even if they were generally very much in favour of public schools, they did not see any other way but to take them out. One of the parents shared her reflections:

We understood that we had to try to change the system, but I could not sacrifice my child. Changing the system would take time and it was better that he went to another school. (Interviewee 2)

However, the parents also pointed out that it is not so much a choice to be made because there are few private schools and they have long waiting lists. Independently, they shared their stories on social media, and some of them wrote articles that were published in newspapers. One of the initiators of the FiO said that she had the idea to start a parent uprising after a frustrating meeting at her child's school, where she again raised her concerns that were not taken seriously.

In the early phase of establishing the movement, parents joined after hearing about it from others and later on even more parents wanted to contribute due to the publicity of the Facebook group or members' participation in public debates. Consequently, many members did not know each other before but rather connected mainly through social media and a joint concern and wish to change the strong focus on performance and measurement of students' competencies and learning

progress. The engagement of the parents varied over time, but around 25–35 parents participated when they met on a regular basis in the initial phase. Besides their shared concern, the interviewed parents described the parents involved as highly educated and resourceful, with predominant native Norwegian backgrounds, engaged in the education of their children, but as representing varied political views and living in different parts of the city.

### Goals, Action Strategies and Alliances

In explaining the movement's goals, one of the initiators stated the following: 'After not succeeding in talking to the teachers and the principals in the local schools, we had to go to the top and do our best to contribute to changing the system'. As such, by no longer fighting alone but together, the members of FiO aimed to gain attention and support for their case and work towards a political shift in Oslo at the local elections, which took place in September 2015. To achieve their goals, FiO members actively participated in the public debate on education by writing newspaper articles and participating in live debates. While doing so, they often presented examples from the children's schools (week plans, forms of self-assessment and learning goals) and relied on expert advice and research to advocate for change. Moreover, members of the FiO spread information through social media and in meetings with the parent council (FAU) at local schools and employed lobbying strategies.

To mobilise support, several interviewees considered Facebook an important arena for the movement to reach out to a large number of people quickly. While this function on Facebook was relatively new when they established their group, one of the members stated that 'without the Facebook group, it would not have been possible for the movement to gain such attention and publicity as it did' (int. 3). Altogether, 4,186 people now follow the group on Facebook, seven years after it was established. The followers are quite mixed and include other parents, teachers, researchers within the field of education and school leaders, but mainly from other municipalities. As highlighted in previous research on social movements, alliances and collaboration with other parties are crucial with regard to the success and impact of the movement. At local schools, the members of the FiO were often representatives of the parent council (FAU),<sup>3</sup> and they tried to involve these formal organisations of parents, parent councils at other schools as well as the Parents' Committee for Basic Education (FUG).<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, this strategy did not have the desired effects. Many parents did not want to support the movement for several reasons. Some of them agreed with the views of the FiO but were afraid of consequences for their children. Others agreed, but they did not want to get involved because their children were doing okay in school, or they were torn between wanting to offer support but feeling powerless to do so. A third group of parents found it hard to believe that testing and other activities could be damaging since they trusted the school authorities to act in the best interest of their child.

With regard to educators, the responses were mixed. The interviewees underscored that the FiO received support from a large number of individual teachers. However, many of them were

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<sup>3</sup> The parents' council consists of all the parents at the school. They elect representatives to the parent council's working committee (in Norwegian: *foreldrerådets arbeidsutvalg*, FAU). The parent council represents all the parents at the school. The council shall ensure that the parents have real participation, promote the parents' common interests and contribute to the pupils and parents being able to take an active part in the work of creating a good school environment.

<sup>4</sup> The Parents' Committee for Basic Education (FUG) is an independent advisory body for the Ministry of Education and the Directorate of Education in cases that deal with cooperation between school and home. The parent committees shall work for good cooperation between kindergarten/school and home and shall safeguard the parents' interests in the school context (The Royal Ministry of Education and Research, 2021).

afraid of doing it openly (e.g. by liking posts on Facebook) due to their fear of consequences from the school principal and the school administration. Moreover, in the early phase of the FiO, some of the members had contact with a teacher uprising in the Sandefjord municipality.<sup>5</sup> The contact was limited to exchanging information and supporting each other on Facebook. Simultaneously, the interviewees explained that they received no support from the union that represented teachers' interests,<sup>6</sup> and they questioned the lack of engagement by the union and whether the union had 'understood what its role is' (interviewee 1).

The FiO experienced significant resistance from other actors when they spoke up publicly. For instance, 140 school principals in Oslo wrote an opinion article that was published in the largest newspaper in Norway, *Aftenposten*, on 18 November 2015 ('Vi rektorer slår ring om Oslo-skolen', 2015). In the article, the principals turn the movement's arguments around, stating that the criticism raised by three named persons is not in the best interest of the students and they question their agenda. The narrative put forward is that there are only a few people who express their discontent with the work of principals and teachers in Oslo and these people speak badly about incidents at school. From their encounter with parents, the principals claim to know that most express their satisfaction with the work of teachers and school principals in schools in Oslo. The following excerpt illustrates an attempt to put the movement down and make it insignificant: 'We have heard about the parental uprising and wonder where it is and when it will start' ('Vi rektorer slår ring om Oslo-skolen', 2015). Parts of the article are highly emotional. While the parents argue that children are victims, the principals portray themselves and the teachers as victims: 'We are tired of being distrusted, accused of cheating and of betraying the weakest' ('Vi rektorer slår ring om Oslo-skolen', 2015). In this way, they frame the parents involved in the movement as actors who seek to damage the reputation of the schools. Moreover, the principals blamed the media for whipping up a hysteria around goals and performance testing: 'The goal hysteria is made up by the media. Wise teachers and leaders know how to relate results to the context' ('Vi rektorer slår ring om Oslo-skolen', 2015).

Beyond school principals, the FiO has received critique from an educational researcher who published a critical opinion article in the same national newspaper. In the article, he referred to the FiO as 'the new losers in the Oslo school', which is made up of 'a resourceful group of parents from an education class with political power' (Isaksen, 2018):

The fear that most parents have that their own children will fall outside the knowledge society is expressed as opposition to a school system. This criticism from parts of the middle class is well known and old but is strikingly loud in Oslo. (...). At the same time, we get new winners in the education system who do not have the same political power and who do not raise their voices but who today enter the doors of educational institutions with high-grade requirements that were previously reserved for a white middle class.

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<sup>5</sup> The Teacher Uprising in Sandefjord municipality started as many primary school teachers in Sandefjord refused to take part in the semi-annual check on whether their pupils were below, above or at the expected level. The teachers asked the question: Who will ultimately decide in the school, the politicians we have chosen or the teachers with the professional knowledge? (*Læreroprør i Sandefjord del.1*, YouTube).

<sup>6</sup> The Teacher Union (*Utdanningsforbundet*) is the second largest union in Norway with ca. 180,000 members. Their main tasks include taking care of the interests of the members when it comes to pay and working conditions as well as professional and educational policy issues. By doing this, they aim to ensure that children, young people and adults receive high-quality education (*Om oss, utdanningsforbundet.no*).

Several of the interviewees reflected on the ways in which principals and the school administration met their criticism by personal attacks in public and the consequences for parents wanting to support the movement:

I think some parents, including me, got worried by the personal attacks on members participating in the public debate and I think this disciplined us massively and led to us taking on a more passive role as a support team. (Interviewee 5)

Several of the members stated that they were afraid that their engagement would have consequences for their children. Other members with jobs linked to the public sector reflected on the implications for their jobs and chose to have a low profile. Due to these reflections and the amount of time they could invest in, the members took on various roles in the movement. Some of them served actively as a 'back office', working on texts, etc. or took part in lobbying and activities outside of the public eye, and a larger group of parents supported the posts on Facebook.

The interviewed parents also experienced other types of power strategies in terms of being silenced in specific situations. In parents' meetings, the principals would ignore them if they raised their hands to ask a question or comment on something. There are also examples of principals who, on a general basis, urged the parents 'not to talk the school down' when they criticised the performance orientation of the school and raised awareness of the implications for their own child.

### Successes and Future Outlook

Despite several obstacles, the interviewees perceived important successes. For example, having been mentioned in editorials in various newspapers during the election year (e.g. *Aftenposten*, *Adresseavisen*, *Dagbladet*, *VG*, *Klassekampen* and *Morgenbladet*) is emphasised as an achievement. Newspaper articles and Facebook posts show that the movement managed to reach out to several political parties, such as the Labour Party, the Socialist Party, the Red Party and the Green Party, and that representatives from these parties referred to the movement in the media. Moreover, all the interviewees strongly believed that they contributed to a political shift after the local election in Oslo municipality in 2015. This election marked the end of 18 years of the Conservative Party being in charge of the coalition in the City Council. The new coalition was formed by the Labour Party, the Socialist Party and the Green Party. The fact that representatives of the movement were invited to meet with the new leader of the Council for Education and Child Services is also described as a major success. It is, however, emphasised that the movement was not about political parties but aimed at changing the strong focus on testing and control in schools:

We were a mixed group politically and regarding our case, it was not relevant who was in charge of the City Council. If the sitting political parties would have been interested in revisiting their policies, this would have been fine [...]. We wanted a change in school policy. (Interviewee 2)

Several interviewees who attended the meeting with the leader of the Council for Education and Child Services expressed disappointment with the outcomes of the meeting. They felt that they were met with understanding and that the leader agreed with many of the movements' arguments. They left the meeting with the overall perception that cooperation with the educational administration in the city was good but that initiating changes would be problematic with the current leadership of the educational administration. One of the interviewees described that it did not come as a surprise:

We understood that the committee would not be able to change anything with the current director. The bureaucrats do what they want [...]. We decided that our next step was to work towards getting as much as possible on the table to remove the

director. It was not an attack on a person. By strictly focusing on our case, we managed to avoid that and this was important to us. (Interviewee 2)

As part of their new plan, the movement members received legal advice from high-profile lawyers and they worked actively to collect evidence that they made public. At one point, they even considered a lawsuit against the school administration but decided against it, mostly due to possible implications for their children. Moreover, they collaborated with other actors, such as the Change Factory (in Norwegian: *Forandringsfabrikken*), which is a foundation that works towards giving young people in the welfare system a voice with which to identify system-changing ideas and help implement change. Various actors, particularly teachers, sent them material to support their work. The change of the Vice Mayor in December 2017 and the conflict that escalated between the Vice Mayor and the Director of the Education Agency led to the director being forced to leave her position, after 18 years, in November 2018. The interviewees perceived this as a major victory, even if it could not be linked to the movement. They expressed their contribution in terms of raising awareness over time about school governing practices that are not to the best of the children or that are questionable with respect to the Education Act and constitutional rights for teachers and other stakeholders (e.g. the right to free speech). Other changes to which the movement has contributed include the decision that municipal standardised tests are made voluntary for schools and the increased awareness around using diagnostic test results for accountability purposes. Still, interviewees are aware that the changes for which they have been working have not yet arrived in the classrooms:

The director is gone, but it is still a long way to change the strong control focus in schools. This has been enforced for many years. For my children, I see no change. (Interviewee 7)

In more general terms, several members reflect on the overall success of raising their voices as parents and that their hard work has led to change, even if they did not accomplish all they set out to do. Although the movement was initiated in Oslo and initially mainly criticised the local educational authorities in Oslo, the movement received national attention as a result of its members participating in debates on television, radio, newspapers and social media. In recent years, the movement has spread beyond Oslo, gaining support in different municipalities across the country and it has been an inspiration to other protest movements, such as *Barnehageopprøret* (in English: The Kindergarten Uprising) that established their Facebook group in 2016 to work against increasing performance measurement in Kindergarten.<sup>7</sup>

## Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined the discourses, action strategies and successes of a Norwegian parental movement that resists educational standardisation and organises educational change. Our findings highlight that members of FiO express fierce criticism towards concrete manifestations of management by objectives and results in classroom practices, and they seek a change of orientation in the local school system in terms of focusing on developing the whole child and not only basic competencies that can be measured by standardised tests. The analysis highlights how the motivations of parents to join the FiO strongly align with the motivations documented in previous research on members of anti-standardisation movements, including wishes for a broader education and concerns about the impact of standardised testing on children's wellbeing and self-

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<sup>7</sup> [Barnehageopprøret- info | Facebook](#)

esteem, as well as on teachers and on teaching practices (e.g. Lipman, 2011; Stitzlein, 2020). While some activist movements in the United States have fought for social justice by demonstrating that test-based accountability reforms have harmed disadvantaged communities and students in particular (cf. Au, 2010; Dianis et al., 2015), the members of FiO believe a strong performance regime in the long run will harm all students and teachers, as well as society as a whole.

A key factor contributing to the movement emerging in Norway's capital city relates to the strong performance orientation in the way schools in Oslo have been governed since the turn of the millennium. Another important factor in the emergence of the movement relates to the disappointment and anger parents felt after raising their concerns at their local schools. Several of the interviewees expressed this as their 'naive beliefs', as they thought they would be listened to and that it was a shock to them that they were sent away and even laughed at. The anger and their strong belief in their case and that they had a greater opportunity to accomplish change by joining forces united them as a group. Even if they otherwise had different political standpoints, the interviewed parents expressed strong concerns for all children since the strong performance orientation and increased standardisation are in danger of limiting possible arenas to succeed in school.

Still, the movement mostly includes native-Norwegian, middle- or upper-class parents, which shows how the emergence of and involvement in the movement might be caught up in issues of class, social capital and social privilege (see also Bjordal & Haugen, 2021). This finding aligns with previous research, which shows that protests against standardized testing and educational standardization are particularly widespread among White, affluent and highly educated parents (e.g. Abraham et al., 2019; Taylor-Heine & Wilson, 2020). Similar to other contexts (e.g. Green et al., 2020), in the case of the FiO, parents' class backgrounds were sometimes used against them, characterizing them as 'the new losers in the Oslo school' who fail to come to grips with greater social mobility.

The findings also raise questions related to how cooperation between school and home is defined and handled in cases where school principals and parents have different perspectives. However, according to the Education Act (2010), it is the responsibility of schools to ensure good collaboration with parents. Together, they are obliged to find the best ways to collaborate for the sake of the child's development.

It is important to emphasise that the FiO, as a movement, does not act in a vacuum. Rather, its actions represent a voice for change and at the same time a response to ongoing debates and criticism in a specific political and socio-historical context. In particular, two incidents can be seen as major contributors to the movement in reconsidering the action strategies that shape its further development: the published letter from 140 principals in Oslo and the meeting with the new Council for Education and Child Services after the election. The first incident led to diverse reactions by the members in terms of reflecting on their engagement due to fear of possible consequences (e.g. negative reactions from other parents and personal attacks in the public that may impact their children). At the same time, the findings show that after this incident, the members reframed what had happened, considering that such a massive response to their efforts must show that they were on the right track, which mobilised them to continue the battle for change. The second major incident seems to have led to a repositioning of the movement related to rethinking the use of multiple strategies to work for change.

Moreover, with regard to action strategies, our findings suggest that the FiO has taken a different approach than other parental resistance movements, including the Opt-Out movements in the United States. That is, rather than opting their children out of standardised tests, some parents chose to opt their children out of public schools and enrol them in private schools to give them a

broader education that emphasises whole-child pedagogies.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, all interviewees explained that they strongly believe in the public school system and the comprehensive school model. As such, they kept working towards change in public schools by actively participating in public discussions, spreading information through social media and in local school meetings, and by lobbying.

With regard to the outcomes of the FiO movement, the findings highlight how interviewees perceive important successes, including increasing public awareness of the detrimental effects of particular school governing practices, as well as the removal of the school director at the municipal level. In this light, despite significant resistance from educational authorities and stakeholders, a key factor that seems to have contributed to FiO members making their voices heard relates to the possibility of establishing Facebook groups. It appears that social media was crucial for the movement to mobilise and reach out to a wider public audience, communicate their views and messages and confront actors that criticised or even tried to silence the movement. Through the Facebook group, it also became more visible how big the group was, including passive members and supporters. Without the Facebook group, people could be led to believe that FiO consisted of only a few publicly active representatives. Nonetheless, even though social media seems to have played a key role in the movement's success, some of the members also reflect on the limitations of using social media and argue for the need to act in a range of other arenas to meet representatives of society. Retrospectively, some members reflect on the fact that you basically reach out to people with the same opinions or to people who seek to oppose your opinions. To have meaningful dialogues about important topics necessary in a democracy, other types of discussions are also needed.

Still, regardless of important achievements, many interviewees claimed to notice little change in classroom practices. For example, even though municipal standardised tests are made voluntary for schools, many schools continue to rely on them. This finding aligns with previous research, which shows that a major barrier to change forms the 'residual belief that high-stakes testing will produce educational benefits' (Neill, 2016, p. 23). As such, our study highlights how policy changes might be insufficient, since the use of standardised testing combined with accountability practices has been institutionalised top-down in the local school system over the last two decades. Questions can be raised if necessary changes regarding learning goals, classroom activities and their pedagogical orientation now have to emerge from within the school system.

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<sup>8</sup> According to the Education Act (2007), private schools in Norway can get approval based on providing an alternative pedagogical orientation, life view, international education or specific educational programs.



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## SPECIAL ISSUE

### Anti-Standardization and Testing Opt-Out Movements in Education: Resistance, Disputes and Transformation

## education policy analysis archives

Volume 30 Number 136

September 6, 2022

ISSN 1068-2341



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