Opt-Outs: What Is Lost When Students Do Not Test

MICHELLE CROFT, PhD/JD

Scores on annual statewide achievement tests can provide parents, students, educators, and policymakers with valuable information—but only if students participate. This issue brief provides background about recent increases in (and efforts to expand) the number of students opting out of statewide assessments, describes the information and data quality lost when students do not participate in statewide annual testing, and offers recommendations for reducing opt-outs and their negative effects.

Background

The majority of the general public do not support testing opt-outs. A poll conducted in 2015 by Education Next found that 59% of the general public, and 52% of parents, opposed letting parents decide whether to have their children take state math and reading tests. A similar 2015 poll by Phi Delta Kappa and Gallup found that 59% of public school parents would not excuse their own child from taking standardized tests. However, in the 2014–2015 school year, groups of parents throughout the United States opted their students out of testing. In New York State, 20 percent of students opted out of statewide testing this year, and in Washington State, more than one-fourth of high school juniors refused to participate—which caused participation rates to fall far below the federally required 95 percent. Additionally, significant numbers of parents in Colorado, Florida, Oregon, Maine, Michigan, New Jersey, and New Mexico opted their students out of statewide testing this past year.

Parents have cited a number of reasons for opting their children out. The New York parents’ group United to Counter the Core cites concerns about testing, curriculum, and the direction of the state Department of Education as reasons to opt out. Regarding testing itself, parents elsewhere have reported concern about the types of tests administered, the length and number of tests, and the administration modes.

A majority of states (34) require all students to participate in state testing, but that could be changing. In the last year, both federal and state legislative bodies have introduced bills related to opt-outs. In both the US Senate and the US House of Representatives, amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) were proposed that would allow parents to opt their children out of testing but would not penalize the school for accountability purposes.

Michelle Croft, PhD, JD, is a principal research associate in the Office of Policy, Advocacy, and Government Relations at ACT.
The House amendment passed, while the Senate amendment was rejected. In the states, Oregon passed legislation requiring the state department of education to provide information to parents about their ability to opt their children out of testing. The Maine legislature passed a similar law, but it was vetoed by the governor. Organizations such as the National Education Association (NEA) are interested in engaging with parents and families to support a national opt-out movement, making it likely that states will continue to introduce such legislation.

Accuracy of Data
Of course, student assessment data is useful only if it is accurate. When large numbers of students opt out of testing, the meaning of group-level scores may become distorted, particularly if the opt-outs are concentrated in particular student populations. For example, in New York State, most students who opted out attended primarily white, middle- and upper-middle class districts in Long Island. At the same time, the New York Commissioner of Education indicated that in some cases, teachers may have been calling parents of low-scoring students asking them to keep their children home during testing. The concentration of opt-outs in particular demographic groups would provide misleading information to the public about overall student performance.

Why Does This Information Matter?
The potential increase in the number of states permitting opt-outs is important because when students do not participate in annual statewide testing, parents, students, educators, and policymakers lose information used to improve classroom instruction, measure the performance of students, classes, schools, or districts, and strengthen research and program evaluation. Opt-outs also threaten the overall accuracy—and therefore the usefulness—of the data provided.

Information to Improve Classroom Instruction
Statewide test scores are one of the most readily available forms of data used by educators to help inform instruction. Individual student data can be used to identify general strengths and weaknesses, and can identify students who may need additional support. When aggregated to a specific group, class, grade, school, or district, achievement data can help in guiding instruction or to tailor curriculum. It can also be used in setting goals for students’ annual performance.

Information about Student Performance
Statewide test scores allow parents and educators to see how students measure up to statewide academic standards intended for all students in the state, something they cannot get from grades based on specific classroom curriculum. While grades are important, they can also be influenced by a variety of factors unrelated to student achievement, such as grade inflation, noncognitive factors separate from achievement (such as attendance and timely completion of assignments), unintentional bias, or unawareness of performance expectations in subsequent grades (e.g., what it means to be prepared for college). For this reason, grades are an insufficient means of understanding a student’s academic achievement in a more objective context. In contrast, statewide assessments test student proficiency relative to content and performance standards that apply to all students in the state, and can provide information about a student’s, school’s, or district’s standing compared to others in the state (or across states, if the assessment is used by more than one).

Information about School Quality
Statewide assessment data enables better transparency and monitoring of how effective schools are in their mission of educating students. One specific benefit of statewide data is the ability to examine and compare how schools are doing in educating certain groups of students. In 2015, a group of more than 25 civil rights or education groups released a statement requesting that the expected reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) require targets for closing achievement gaps for all students, including “each major racial and ethnic group, students with disabilities, English language learners, and students from low-income families.” Without accurate data about the academic achievement of each of these student groups, it would be impossible to determine whether all students are progressing, or identify schools or districts that have promising practices with certain student groups. Another benefit with increased transparency is that the data gives parents an indicator of school quality that can help in selecting a school for their children.

Information for Research and Program Evaluation
Countless efforts to improve schools and education quality have been undertaken over the years, ranging from curricular reforms to alternative teacher pathways. To evaluate the effectiveness of a particular improvement program, statewide test scores...
are often used because they are available annually and in most grades. For example, in an evaluation of the effectiveness of the teacher Talent Transfer Initiative, which provided incentives to a district’s highest-performing teachers to move to and stay in its low-performing schools for at least two years, researchers found that the initiative helped raise elementary math and reading scores by four to ten percentile points.26 On the other hand, a study of state high school graduation requirements found that increasing the number of math and science courses required for graduation did not have an effect on student achievement.27 Student assessment data allows for rigorous examination of programs and policies to ensure that resources are allocated towards what works.

**Recommendations**

Student achievement data gathered from annual statewide assessments can also provide information for educators, the public (including students and their parents), and researchers. When large numbers of students do not take these assessments, the amount, accuracy, and usefulness of the data that can be gained from the tests are threatened. The following recommendations are intended to help school districts, educators, and policymakers maintain this valuable information.

1. **Districts should reduce unnecessary testing.** Examine all student assessment requirements to ensure that each provides useful information. If an assessment does not provide unique or useful information, eliminate the assessment.

2. **Educators and policymakers should improve communication with parents about the value gained from having all students take the assessments.** Provide parents with information about the types of assessments administered, the reasons for the assessments, and the information gained from the assessments. Policymakers should provide parents an opportunity to voice any concerns about the tests administered.28

3. **Policymakers should discourage opting out.** Wherever possible, require students to participation in statewide assessments. States that allow opt-outs should avoid creating laws, policies, or communications that suggest an endorsement of the practice.

4. **Policymakers should support appropriate uses of test scores.** Much of the recent controversy over test scores is related to their potential use as an accountability measure. Test results are an important indicator of student achievement, but they are—and should be—only one of several such indicators. Additionally, the use of test scores should not be limited to accountability metrics. Policymakers should publicize and support programs that facilitate the appropriate use of test scores for instruction, such as funding professional development and requiring teacher preparation programs to provide training in the appropriate interpretation and use of assessments.29 Policies should also encourage the use of assessment data for research, both through funding and, where applicable, explicit legislative language enabling such use.

**Notes**

1. The question asked was: “Do you support or oppose letting parents decide whether to have their children take state math and reading tests?” Michael B. Henderson, Paul E. Peterson, & Martin R. West, “The 2015 EdNext Poll on School Reform,” *Education Next* 16 (2016).

2. The question asked was: “Would you excuse your own child from taking one or more standardized tests?” PDK/Gallup Poll, “Testing Lacks Public Support” (2015), pdkpoll2015.pdkintl.org/236. Interestingly, African American and Hispanic respondents (75% and 65%, respectively) were more likely than white respondents (54%) to say that they would not excuse their child from testing.

3. New York State Education Department, “State Education Department Releases Spring 2015 Grades 3–8 Assessment Results” (August 12, 2015).


19 Grades can be subject to grade inflation where
18 Keshia Clukey, “Education Commissioner
17 Matthew M. Chingos, “Who Opts Out of
Center for Assessment,
15 Kerri A. Kerr, Julie A. Marsh, Gina Schuyler
Center for Assessment,
12 Maine H.P. 471
10 Oregon, H.B. 2655
12 Old Oregon, H.B. 2655
11 Stephen Sawchuk, “NEA to Support Opt-Out,
10 As of the writing of this paper, the bill had not
gone through the conference process. See
Lauren Camera, Senate Passes ESEA Rewrite
with Big Bipartisan Backing, 81-17, EDUC.
WEEK (July 16, 2015), available at blogs.
edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2015/07/
senate_passes_esea_rewrite_wit.html.
11 For example, in response to parent concerns
26 Richard Buddin and Michelle Croft,
Missing the Mark: Students Gain Little from Mandating Extra
25 For an indication of the variety of education
topics, see the Institute of Education Sciences’
24 Providing test score information to lower-
income families participating in a public school
choice plan increases the likelihood that
parents will choose a nearby school with higher
test scores. Justine S. Hastings & Jeffrey M.
Weinstein, “Information School Choice, and
Academic Achievement: Evidence from Two
23 Education Trust, “More than 25 Civil Rights
Groups and Education Advocates Release
Principles for ESEA Reauthorization: ‘The Federal Role Must Be Honored and
22 For example, the 2012 ACT National
Curriculum Survey® found a large gap between
how high school teachers perceive the college
readiness of high school graduates and how
college instructors perceive the readiness of
their first-year students. ACT, ACT National
Curriculum Survey 2012: Policy Implications
on Preparing for Higher Standards (Iowa City,
21 A recent study in Israel following students
from sixth grade to high school found that
teachers overestimated boys’ abilities and
underestimated girls’ abilities in math and
science when grading assignments. Victor
Human Capital Gaps: Short and Long Term
Consequences of Teachers’ Stereotypical
20 Elaine M. Allensworth, Julia A. Gwynne, Paul
Moore, & Marisa de la Torre, Looking Forward
To High School and College: Middle Grade
Indicators of Readiness in Chicago Public
Schools (Chicago: The University of Chicago
Consortium on Chicago School Research,
19 Grades can be subject to grade inflation where
grades are increased without an increase in
student achievement. ACT research found an
increase in high school GPA of 12.5 percent
between 1991 and 2003, meaning that parents
may not be given an accurate depiction of
student performance. ACT, Are High School
18 Keshia Clukey, “Education Commissioner
at Minnesota Public Radio, “House Could Vote on Parent’s Right to Opt
Out of Tests Under ESEA,” Education Week,
July 6, 2015.
17 Matthew M. Chingos, “Who Opts Out of
State Tests?” The Brown Center Chalkboard
(Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution,
2015).
16 Center for Assessment, Using Baseline Data
and Information to Set SLO Targets (Center
for Assessment, 2013), www.nciea.org/wp-
15 Kerri A. Kerr, Julie A. Marsh, Gina Schuyler
Ikemoto, Hilary Darilek, & Heather Barney,
“Strategies to Promote Data Use for
Instructional Improvement: Actions, Outcomes,
and Lessons from Three Urban Districts,”
Which Data, What Purposes, and Promoting
and Hindering Factors,” Teaching and Teacher
Education 26, no. 3 (2010): 482–496.
14 As of the writing of this paper, the bill had not
gone through the conference process. See
Lauren Camera, Senate Passes ESEA Rewrite
with Big Bipartisan Backing, 81-17, EDUC.
WEEK (July 16, 2015), available at blogs.
edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2015/07/
senate_passes_esea_rewrite_wit.html.
13 Stephen Sawchuk, “NEA to Support Opt-Out,
Oppose Common-Core Testing” Education
Week, July 7, 2015.
12 Richard Buddin and Michelle Croft,
Missing the Mark: Students Gain Little from Mandating Extra
11 For example, in response to parent concerns
26 Richard Buddin and Michelle Croft,
Missing the Mark: Students Gain Little from Mandating Extra
25 For an indication of the variety of education
topics, see the Institute of Education Sciences’
24 Providing test score information to lower-
income families participating in a public school
choice plan increases the likelihood that
parents will choose a nearby school with higher
test scores. Justine S. Hastings & Jeffrey M.
Weinstein, “Information School Choice, and
Academic Achievement: Evidence from Two
23 Education Trust, “More than 25 Civil Rights
Groups and Education Advocates Release
Principles for ESEA Reauthorization: ‘The Federal Role Must Be Honored and
22 For example, the 2012 ACT National
Curriculum Survey® found a large gap between
how high school teachers perceive the college
readiness of high school graduates and how
college instructors perceive the readiness of
their first-year students. ACT, ACT National
Curriculum Survey 2012: Policy Implications
on Preparing for Higher Standards (Iowa City,
21 A recent study in Israel following students
from sixth grade to high school found that
teachers overestimated boys’ abilities and
underestimated girls’ abilities in math and
science when grading assignments. Victor
Human Capital Gaps: Short and Long Term
Consequences of Teachers’ Stereotypical
20 Elaine M. Allensworth, Julia A. Gwynne, Paul
Moore, & Marisa de la Torre, Looking Forward
To High School and College: Middle Grade
Indicators of Readiness in Chicago Public
Schools (Chicago: The University of Chicago
Consortium on Chicago School Research,
19 Grades can be subject to grade inflation where
grades are increased without an increase in
student achievement. ACT research found an
increase in high school GPA of 12.5 percent
between 1991 and 2003, meaning that parents
may not be given an accurate depiction of
student performance. ACT, Are High School