

Standards, Assessments & Opting Out

Spring 2015

Illinois students this spring will take new state assessments that reflect the rigor and relevance of the new Illinois Learning Standards¹. But some classmates will sit out and join the pushback against standardized testing.

Opt-out advocates raise concerns about over-testing, and the resulting toll on students as well as the impact on classroom instruction². While this underscores real concerns, it risks marginalizing low-performing students who could be pushed out and distracts from efforts to continually improve a state assessment system that supports teaching and learning.

Illinois is in the throes of a transition to new standards and assessments. This will take time, and there will be challenges. But the new, improved assessments help to ensure that all students are taught to high standards and supported to achieve them³ - now more than ever, all means all.

Several States Recognize A Student's Right to Opt Out, While Others Prohibit

At present, approximately seven states recognize a student's right to opt out of state assessments: California⁴, Nebraska⁵, Oregon⁶, Pennsylvania⁷, Utah⁸, Washington⁹ and Wisconsin¹⁰. The rationale for each statute varies, as do the potential consequences for students, educators and schools.

Other states run the gamut of being silent on student participation in state assessments to expressly requiring their participation, such as Arkansas & Texas¹¹.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act requires that 95 percent of a school's students take statewide assessments. Schools that do not reach this 95-percent threshold risk academic sanctions and loss of federal funds reserved for low-income students¹⁴ – students who, research shows, need additional, targeted support¹⁵.

The potential impact of an Illinois opt-out bill – and the specific impact on our most disadvantaged students – is unclear given the transition to new state assessments, and the concerns raised about such a significant shift. Indeed, this moment of transition has opened wide the door for the opt-out discussion in Illinois.

Illinois Legislators Will Consider Two Opt-Out Bills

Illinois legislators this session will consider two bills that would recognize a student's right to sit out of state assessments.

- *HB131* would bar the Illinois State Board of Education from assessing any student whose guardian asks that they not be assessed and require that ISBE develop an opt-out form for districts to distribute¹⁶.
- *HB0306* also would bar the assessment of any student who opts out, and prevent students, teachers and schools from being negatively impacted for evaluation or accountability purposes. Schools would be required to provide supervised enrichment for students who opt-out¹⁷.

Illinois currently recognizes some reasons for why a student might not participate in state assessments, such as being “medically exempt, homebound exempt, in jail or out of state/country as with a foreign exchange program¹⁸.”

Opt-Out Has Unintended Consequences For Students

As legislators consider the opt-out proposals, it is important they also consider unintended consequences – namely, the potential push out of low-performing students from state assessments. Removing accountability considerations for educators and schools - considerations that shine a light on the performance and progress of all students – make this more likely. Such concerns spurred dozens of civil rights organizations to issue a statement in support of annual assessment for every child.

If opt-out is made an option, then it should be used judiciously.

Opt-Out Distracts From Improvement Efforts

When assessments reflect the standards we hold for students, they play a vital part of the educational process¹⁹. They help teachers understand what students know and are able to do, and what is needed to help them progress²⁰. So, too, do they give families information about their child's learning. Just as students would not opt out of trigonometry or sit out Shakespeare, students should participate in the entire educational process, including assessment.

The new state assessments – called PARCC – are a far better test and can only get better with good data. This initial year will have challenges, to be sure. But it is an opportunity to get baseline results and improve for the future.

- 1 Illinois State Board of Education, "A New Vision of Assessment: Texts Worth Reading, Problems Worth Solving, Tests Worth Taking," 2014.
- 2 Education Week, "Testing Skeptics Aim to Build Support for Opt-Out Strategy," 2014.
- 3 Center for American Progress, National Urban League and the National Council of La Raza, "The Common Core Is An Opportunity for Education Equity," 2014.
- 4 California Education Code §§ 51513, 60614, 60615.
- 5 Nebraska Department of Education, "Nebraska State Accountability: 2013 Online Test Administration Manual," 2013.
- 6 Portland Tribune, "Students Launch Testing 'Opt-Out' Protest," 2013.
- 7 Associated Press, "Parents Can Keep Their Kids Out Of Pennsylvania's Assessments," 2013.
- 8 Utah State Office of Education, "Memo to District Superintendents, Charter Operators regarding Opting Out of State Testing," 2015.
- 9 State of Washington, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, "State Testing: Frequently Asked Questions About State Testing."
- 10 Wisconsin State Statute, Sec. 118.30.2B4.
- 11 Education Commission of the States, "Assessment Opt-Out Practices: State Reaction to Parent Pushback," 2015.
- 12 Education Commission of the States, "Exit Exams: States Require Passage of Exit Exams for High School Graduation," 2007.
- 13 State of Washington, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, "Washington State Graduation Requirements."
- 14 U.S. Department of Education, "Letter to the Honorable Christopher A. Koch," December 14, 2014.
- 15 Jacob, Brian A. and Ludwig, Jens, "Improving Educational Outcomes for Poor Children," Focus, 2009.
- 16 Illinois General Assembly, HB131, 2015.
- 17 Illinois General Assembly, HB036, 2015.
- 18 Illinois State Board of Education, "Reasons For Not Testing."
- 19 Illinois State Board of Education, "Introduction to Balanced Assessment," 2015.
- 20 Consortium on Chicago School Research, "Authentic Intellectual Work and Standardized Tests: Conflict or Coexistence," 2001; and Bambrick-Santoyo, Paul, "Leverage Leadership: A Practical Guide To Building Exceptional Schools," 2012.