

Towards an Understanding of the Testing Opt-Out Movement: Why Parents Choose to Opt-Out or Opt-In

By Margaret Paladino, Ed.D.

Abstract

The opt-out movement, a grassroots coalition of opposition to high-stakes tests that are used to sort students, evaluate teachers, and rank schools, has the largest participation on Long Island, New York, where approximately 50% of the eligible students in grades three to eight opted out of the English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics tests in 2019 ("Projects: ELA and Math Opt-Outs 2016-2019," 2019). Quantitative research has shown a racial disparity between parents who opted out and opted in with White, middle class parents participating in the opt-out movement at greater rates than Latinx, Black, and Asian parents (Au, 2017; Bennett, 2016; Hildebrand, 2017; Klein, 2016; Murphy, 2017; Phi Delta Kappa & Gallup Poll, 2017; Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky, 2016; Ryan, 2016; Tompson, Benz, & Agiesta, 2013).

Parents are powerful policy actors that influence policy at the district and school level (Bakeman, 2018). This study has important implications for state legislation that supports a more equitable assessment and accountability system—one that does not undermine the student and teacher relationship. In addition, one that reports reliable individual growth of the students. Providing an equitable system that does not put undue pressure on low-income districts of color to raise scores or get sanctioned. Crafting an accountability system that fosters teaching and learning grounded in comprehensive educational pedagogy instead of test prep materials for corporate profit.

This study yielded three major findings. First, the districts' messaging about the state testing and parent's right to opt out was reflected in the opt-out rates. The high opt-out district disseminated the most information about the testing and parents' rights to opt out. Meanwhile, the low opt-out district held pep rallies and pizza challenges to incentivize opting in. Second, although the opt-out movement's original aim was to improve public school education for the greater good, the parents interviewed in this study made individualistic choices for their child about opting out or opting in based on the information they had access to from the district and social networks of information, as well as their philosophies of parenting and education. Finally, regardless of parent involvement levels,

race/ethnicity, and socio-economic status, parents' reasons for opting out or opting in were based on superficial reasoning and were more similar than different across the three districts.

Statement of the Problem

The number of students who opt out of the NYS tests are high for Long Island, NY, and as a whole, the numbers do not represent all districts equally and all people equally. Across New York State, there are districts with opt-out rates that fall within the range of 10% to 79% (Harris, 2015; "Projects: ELA and Math Opt-Outs 2016-2019," 2019). These statistics give insight into the breadth and frequency of opting out across districts but fail to meaningfully describe the types of families engaging with this movement. In fact, opt-out rates follow clear racial and socioeconomic lines and are not representative of the diversity of New York State and Long Island. The question remains, do all parents have the same information and opportunity to make an informed decision to participate or not participate in the opt-out movement?

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine how parents in high, medium, and low opt-out districts made their decision to opt out or opt into the ELA and math tests in the fourth and fifth-grade. It also explored how superintendents and principals made sense of their opt-out rates in their respective districts and how each district's procedures and policies that are in place, if any, regarding information about testing and opting out influenced the process.

Theoretical Framework

The framework of the study included social movement theory, social capital theory, and rational choice theory to provide insight as to how a movement is propelled forward, who is included and excluded, and how the decision to participate is made. Christiansen's (2009) four-stage model of social movements was utilized to examine the social movement theory and to apply the key components

of the theory to the opt-out movement. Bourdieu's social capital theory (1973, 1984) was used to understand how parents access information about the opt-out movement, and rational choice theory was utilized to examine how parents made their decisions and what components are considered when making their decision rational (Abell, 1992; Coleman & Fararo, 1992; Mooney-Marini, 1992; Münch, 1992; Scheff, 1992).

Methods

This study is a qualitative phenomenological multi-case study that utilized an inquiry-based research design and a constructivist worldview with a purposive sample of three suburban school districts with a high, a medium, and a low opt-out rate. For a qualitative multi-case study, Creswell (1998) recommended five to 25 participants, and this study included three superintendents, four principals, and 52 parents (n=59). The inquiry-based research design was in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured, 30-60-minute interviews collected over a period of six months that began in late September 2018 with the superintendents, followed by the building principals and then the parents, which concluded in late March 2019. In addition to the interviews, fieldnotes obtained from attendance at PTA and PTSA meetings as well as school-based programs added to the data collection.

Setting

Interviews were conducted in three school districts located on Long Island, New York. One district reported a high opt-out rate, one a medium opt-out rate, and the other a low opt-out rate. The superintendent interviews took place at the central administrative office in each district, principals'

interviews were conducted at their school office, and parent interviews at public libraries and coffee shops within each neighborhood. See **Table 1** for district demographics. To ensure confidentiality, all names including districts, schools, administrators, and parents were assigned a pseudonym.

Research Questions

1. What does it mean to be a fourth and fifth-grade parent in a high, medium, or low opt-out district?
2. What are the stated reasons parents give for opting or not opting their child out of the New York State tests in high, medium, and low districts?
 - a. How do these parents receive their information about the New York State tests and their options to opt their child out of the tests?
 - b. According to Christiansen's model, how does each of the three districts opt-out movement correspond to the four-stages?
3. How do the high opt-out, medium opt-out, and low-opt out districts communication strategies and responses to parents differ regarding the state tests?

Findings

The data collected revealed three main findings: a) parents make their decision to opt out or opt in based on the information they have access to from the district or social networks, b) Latinx, immigrant families may not be able to access the social capital of the school community and are

Table 1
District Demographics

	Ashbury SD	Butler SD	Culvert SD
Opt Out 2018			
ELA & Math	>50%	30-40%	<20%
Total Population	3,570	1,890	3,300
Ethnicity	Predominately White	Most Prevalent Latinx	Majority Latinx
ELL Students	1-5%	5-10%	25-30%
Special Education	10-15%	15-20%	10-15%
Economically Disadvantaged	10-15%	45-50%	65-70%

Note. Demographical data for Table 1 from New York State Education Department <https://data.nysed.gov>
Opt-out rates from *Newsday* <https://projects.newsday.com/databases/long-island/ela-opt-out-2019/>

*Percentages presented in a range to ensure confidentiality

not always aware of their right to opt out of testing, and c) although parents cite the original reasons from the opt-out movement when making their decisions, the reasons they gave for opting out or opting in were mostly superficial and individualistic.

Parents as decision-makers. Parents make their decision to opt out or opt in based on the information they have access to from their district or social networks. In the Ashbury district, opt-out rates are high and the stakes are low for them. The district has a middle to upper socioeconomic status (SES), is a predominantly White district (see Table 1), and the superintendent freely shares his opinion about the unreliability of the NYS tests. Parents are aware of his stance, as Lori, a White opt-out parent, said, "Superintendent Kent made it clear that he was not a believer in this particular test."

On the other hand, the Butler district reported a diverse community with the most prevalent population of Latinx families and a middle SES (see Table 1). The Butler district had medium opt-out rates without high or low-stakes attached to the scores. The superintendent of the Butler district does not share his view of the test or any information about opting out and takes a neutral stance regarding the opt-out movement as a whole. "Unlike the Ashbury district, parents in the Butler district are on their own to research opting out. Natalie, a White opt-in parent, remarked, "The level of discussion in my district is not the same as other surrounding districts."

In the Culvert district with a low SES and a majority population of Latinx, immigrant families (see Table 1), the opt-out rate is low and the stakes attached to the test scores are high. The district does not give out information about parents' rights to opt out, but they do give a substantial amount of information about the test content. They offer pizza party incentives to take the tests, and out of the three districts, Culvert is the only one that participates in test prep with purchased materials from private companies. Similar to the Butler district, parents in the Culvert district are on their own to research opting out. Helena, a Latina opt-out parent, stated, "It's just like kind of informing us, okay the state tests are happening this week, but there's no mention 'Do you want your kids to take it or not?'"

Breach in communication. The findings revealed that Latinx, immigrant families may not be able to access the social capital of the school community and may not be aware of their right to opt out of the testing. This finding resonated in the Butler and Culvert districts who had a more prevalent Latinx, immigrant community as compared to the Ashbury district. Both the administrators and the parents in the Butler and Culvert districts were aware that there was a segment of their population that is not involved and may be uninformed. Tina, a White opt-in parent in the Butler district, stated, "We have a lot of ESL children, so their parents are not involved in the day-to-day PTA stuff." Superintendent Simmons of the Butler district also commented, "We do have a segment of our population which is new to the country, new to education,

new to learning experiences, so they're not as involved in that process yet as others may be." PTA meetings in the Butler district confirm that parent attendance is lacking as compared to the meetings in the Ashbury district.

Over the past two years, the Culvert district has experienced an increase in Latinx, immigrant families in the community. A common theme that ran through the data collected in the Culvert district to explain the low opt-out rate is the absence of these families at school meetings due to the number of Spanish dominant speakers. Although Culvert offers auditory devices to Spanish-speakers, and they have a translator present at their meetings, attendance is not representative of the district population. Maria, a Latina opt-in parent, said, "Maybe more parents would attend different meetings if they understood what was going on." Superintendent Iams of the Culvert district attributed their low opt-out rates to the Latinx community and explained, "I would also attribute it to our high immigration population. With 67% Hispanic, not all are immigrants, however, they may be first or second-generation immigrants where their parents may not be English speakers and may not understand the whole opt out movement."

Individualistic decision. The data disclosed the parents' reasons for opting out or opting in and how and why they made their decision. The opt-out movement began as a call for parents to take back their autonomy as decision-makers for their child's education. Although some of the parents interviewed mentioned the political aspect of the opt-out agenda, none of them cited any of those talking points as their reason for opting out or opting in. For the most part, parents' decisions were mostly superficial and individualistic. For the parents interviewed, unnecessary stress and anxiety, tests do not count, and the scores used to evaluate teachers were their top reasons in preference order. Some of the parents interviewed had a child with an Individual Education Plan (IEP), which played a role in their decision. Lidia, a Latina opt-in parent, said, "It's what is best for my child, and it may not be what's best for everybody else's." Some parents discussed the decision-making process with their child. Carol, a White opt-in parent, explained, "I've always based my choice on how my kids felt that day. What do you want to do?" For some of the parents in the study, if their child did not show signs of anxiety or were capable students, parents opted them in. Alma, a Latina opt-in parent, stated, "She was comfortable taking the test." Other opt-in parents stated that testing is a part of life and school, so it is good practice for future tests, while other opt-in parents said they wanted the objective data.

Implications for Policy and Practice

For the opt-out organizers, when parents choose to create an impact on the state, they should be more inclusive. Some of the parents in the three districts were aware of the Latinx, immigrant population in their district and the possible challenges they may have as Spanish-dominant speakers, but they are not offering an option to promote inclusion. Next, educational practice should be

aligned with educational philosophy rather than constraints of testing. The first step is to decouple the high-stakes associated with the tests, as tests should be viewed as one indicator of a child's academic achievement and not used to evaluate teachers, sort students, or rank schools. Doing so would increase valuable teaching time and reduce time spent on test prep and money spent on the test prep materials. Administrators and teachers in low-performing districts, like Culvert, are under pressure to raise low-test scores to avoid state oversight, and they hold pep rallies, offer pizza parties, and other incentives to persuade students to take the tests. In addition, low SES districts with diverse populations, like Culvert, are forced to exchange progressive educational pedagogy for skill and drill test prep to raise test scores to avoid state intervention. Districts with the greatest need for educational resources to improve the quality of education are confronted with using those funds for test prep materials.

Lastly, district administrators would benefit from expanded efforts into knowing the community. Administrators in the three districts are aware of the lack of attendance at school-based meetings and events by the Latinx, immigrant population in their district, yet they do not offer any outreach programs that involve the community leaders to lend support and opportunities for parents to be a part of the school community. The administrators' voice or lack of voice creates a breach between the school and the community they serve.

Conclusion

The debate between parents, administrators, and the state, as to who owns a child's education was the impetus for parents to take a stand, speak out, and take back their power to decide what is best for their child's education. Unfortunately, not all parents have the same voice and are not given the same forum to express their views. Schools that have low-performance rates on the NYS tests are under the watchful eye of the state to raise their scores. The data from this study showed that parents in low-performing school districts with a low SES, and a majority of Latinx and Black populations are not given the same information as the predominantly White parents in school districts with a higher SES. In low SES districts, information about parental rights to opt out is exchanged for pep rallies, pizza parties, and prizes to encourage test-taking.

Parents are their child's first educator, and their participation in their child's education does not end at the school's front door. They are their child's advocates and outside forces, such as testing, are interfering in their relationship. Not all parents made an informed decision to opt out or opt in their child to the NYS tests, but they all consider their personal values and beliefs about education, and the role they play in their child's education. In doing so, they are actively shaping their children's academic lives and remaking the landscape of standardized testing in New York State.

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