

BACK to SCHOOL

FALL 2016

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SPECIAL
K-12
ISSUE

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or Out?

Standardized
test debate



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TESTING HITS A NERVE



THE ROAD TO COMMON
EDUCATIONAL
STANDARDS IS BESET
WITH OPPOSITION,
CONFUSION

BY KATHERINE
REYNOLDS LEWIS

Nail biting, stress headaches, sleepless nights or all of the above. Standardized testing — and its side effects — has been part of the U.S. public education system for decades.

But lately, the Common Core curriculum and revamped tests are coming under fire. Critics say the new tests put too much pressure on kids, waste »

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instructional time and encourage educators to emphasize rote memorization — teaching to the test — in lieu of meaningful learning.

By several measures, the K-12 school system is failing many of our children:

— Only 28 percent of the high school graduates who have taken the ACT meet all four college-readiness benchmarks (English, reading, math and science), according to a 2015 report by the Iowa City, Iowa, organization that manages the testing program.

— Nearly 1 in 4 high school graduates can't pass the Armed Forces Qualification Test, a standardized test that measures math and reading skills to meet the minimum academic standards required to enlist, according to an analysis by the Education Trust, a non-profit group advocating for higher educational achievement.

These stats are proving political fodder during an election year, with both parties advocating for education reform. Critics of testing are

picketing schools and urging parents to opt their children out of tests.

Celebrities are taking on the issue from both sides: Actor Matt Damon, the son of an educator, and comedian Louis C.K., who tweeted about his children's stress over testing, have spoken against the over-reliance on standardized tests; actress Eva Longoria and musician John Legend are among those who helped fund an ad in support of standardized testing.

What's a parent to do? Here's the history behind standardized testing, so parents can decide on which side of the debate they stand.

2002 NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

For years, states designed and administered standardized tests without much interference from the federal government. But amid

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growing concern about racial inequity in education and the U.S. falling behind international competitors, President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) into law in 2002. It was the most sweeping reform of education since 1965, the year President Johnson's War on Poverty created the Title I program and significantly expanded federal funding for education.

NCLB required states to test students in math and reading every year from third through eighth grades, and at least once from grades 10 through 12, with results broken out by race and subgroups, such as English-language learners and students with disabilities. The law called for states to bring every child to the "proficient" level by the

2013-14 school year, while giving states the prerogative to define proficiency and decide which tests to use. States have fallen short of this goal, with Massachusetts doing the best at only 50 percent of students proficient this year. Low-performing schools risked losing students to a better public school, or even closure.

Over time, educators realized that the law encouraged schools to focus on two numbers — scores on rudimentary English, language arts and literacy, and math tests — which often meant drilling basic skills and facts at the expense of a broader education.

"When you teach to a test or even prep for a test, educators are taken away from some of the good work they could be doing helping students learn," says Elizabeth Green, author of *Building a Better Teacher* and co-founder of Chalkbeat, a news site covering education. »

TESTING BY THE NUMBERS

“

Grading practices are uneven ... from school to school, from state to state.”

— KATI HAYCOCK, CEO of the Education Trust

28

Percentage of high school graduates who have taken the ACT and meet all four college-readiness benchmarks (English, reading, math and science)

1 in 4

Number of high school graduates who can't pass the Armed Forces Qualification Test

112

Number of mandatory standardized tests the average U.S. student in a big-city public school will take between preschool and high school graduation

12 million

Number of students in 29 states and Washington, D.C., who took Common Core-aligned tests



SHOULD YOUR CHILD OPT OUT OF TESTS?

Parents following news about the opt-out movement naturally ask: Should I refuse to allow my child to be tested?

First, understand where your state and school district fall in the Common Core continuum. Do local teachers and principals oppose your child's standardized tests? Or have they found ways to make them work for your school?

If you don't live in a school district

with a strong opt-out movement, you can write to legislators and government officials to voice your opinion. Or connect with activists in your area through groups such as FairTest (fairtest.org) and United Opt Out (unitedoptout.com) that organize people to protest the standardized test.

The consequences vary from state to state, but few are felt by individual children. Opting out may hurt school funding and deny school districts data needed to address gaps in education or achievement.

— Katherine Reynolds Lewis

2009

COMMON CORE

While the reforms of NCLB were taking hold, another movement was gathering steam.

Unlike most developed countries, the U.S. had never required that every child acquire a specified set of skills and body of knowledge. So a third-grade math curriculum in Massachusetts could look quite different than one in Tennessee. But with young people in Asia, Scandinavia and Eastern Europe pulling ahead of U.S. students on international measures of achievement from the 1990s until today, a bipartisan group of governors and educational leaders in 2009 launched an effort to write a set of curriculum standards for English and math. Thus, the Common Core was born.

While many people equate the Common Core with the new wave of standardized tests, it was actually a separate initiative. The idea was to create a voluntary set of standards for curriculum that would prepare students for

college and the working world. Proponents sought to increase the level of rigor in classrooms and develop students' conceptual understanding and critical thinking skills, to rival other countries' educational systems. The standards were published in 2010; as of 2016, all but eight states and Puerto Rico have adopted them.

The bipartisan Common Core concept soon became a political one with President Obama's signing of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), a law the White House says is designed to "boost the economy by investing in critical sectors, including education." Tucked into the bill, which became law less than a month after Obama took office in 2009, was the Race to the Top grant program, which would provide more than \$4 billion to motivate states to adopt common standards, facilitate public charter schools and begin evaluating teachers and principals based on students' performance.

Meanwhile, congressional reauthorization of the NCLB law had stalled. In an attempt »

to ease tension while lawmakers debated the law, the Obama administration decided in 2011 to give states waivers that exempted them from consequences for low-performing schools, with three conditions. First, they had to focus more resources on the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools and those where a segment of the student body was lagging. Second, they had to implement higher standards for all children, which lent support to the Common Core effort. And third, schools had to begin evaluating individual teachers using test data.

“Now, in addition to pressure on schools, there was pressure on teachers. That’s when the backlash started,” says Dana Goldstein, a journalist and author of *The Teacher Wars: A History of America’s Most Embattled Profession*. “In order to get at the weakest of the weak teachers, we ended up scaring the other 95 percent.”

Educators were in a no-win situation. They didn’t yet have tests that would assess students against the more rigorous standards, and teachers and schools were facing penalties for students falling short.

“You still had these bad, dumbed-down NCLB tests but they had high stakes for teachers,” Goldstein says. “This is the era where we begin to see teachers’ unions and parents say: ‘There’s too much testing; bad tests; and they’re too high-stakes.’”

In response, advocates of tests say they provide important data to hold schools accountable for educating all students and closing the achievement gap.

“Grading practices are uneven from teacher to teacher, from school to school, from state to state,” says Kati Haycock, CEO of the Education Trust. “If you don’t also have an objective independent measure of how your child is doing, you don’t have everything you need to argue for your kid.”

“

When you teach to a test ... educators are taken away from some of the good work they could be doing helping students learn.”

— ELIZABETH GREEN,
author and co-founder of Chalkbeat

2015

OPT-OUT MOVEMENT

The average U.S. student in a big-city public school will take 112 mandatory standardized exams between pre-K and high school graduation, which breaks down to roughly eight tests per year — many of them redundant — taking a total 20 and 25 hours, according to a 2015 study by the Council of the Great City Schools, which represents the nation’s largest urban school districts. About 12 million students in 29 states and Washington, D.C., took Common Core-aligned tests last year.

Some parents are saying no to testing. They’re backed by teachers’ unions opposed to tying students’ test results to teacher pay and career progress.

Last year, this opposition coalesced into opt-out protests across the country when parents refused to allow more than half a million

children to take standardized tests. In New York state, a whopping 20 percent of eligible students opted out, as did students in Colorado, Illinois, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon and Washington. And the movement is gaining traction in Florida, Indiana and Texas.

“I’m opting my students out of standardized testing because I think it’s the lazy way to figure out what’s happening in the school,” says Ronda Belen, a Denver mother of Faruq, 15; Amir, 11; Fatima, 5; and Ihsaan, 3. This past spring, the only one of her children subject to standardized testing — Amir — sat out. Given that scores aren’t available until well after the school year ends, she feels the test results add no value to her kids’ education. “There should be more individualized instruction,” she says.

Firm numbers for how many students opted out in spring 2016 won’t be available until later this year. Reasons for opting out vary across the country, with many activists concerned about test-writing corporations driving the process and others protesting a rush to administer tests before teachers have a chance to digest and implement new curricula.

Adding to the complicated picture, last year Congress reauthorized NCLB, renaming it the Every Student Succeeds Act, which gave states more flexibility in choosing curriculum standards and deciding how to measure student learning and progress. Notably, it eliminated the tie between teacher evaluations and student outcomes.

Chalkbeat’s Green sees irony in the turmoil caused in implementing common standards, which aim to reduce chaos in the long term.

“It’s a really good thing that we’re elevating standards,” she says. “There definitely have been costs along the way as we figure out as a country the best way to implement this goal.” ●