

POLICY ISSUE BRIEF: OPT-OUT OF ASSESSMENTS

Issue at a Glance

State policies vary throughout the country, with some specifically allowing or prohibiting opt-outs, while others have no consequences in place if students do not participate in mandatory assessments. Many states do allow exemptions in cases of physical disability, mental health issues, or other emergencies, and a few states allow religious exemptions. California, Colorado, and Maine also have laws on the books requiring school leaders to notify parents of their right to opt out of the assessments, and other states have considered similar legislation in recent years. Still, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 requires schools and districts to maintain a 95% participation rate on state assessments, and states are required to include this as a component of their school accountability systems.

There is not definitive data to prove what motivates parents to opt their children out of assessments, but it can include a combination of things, including a statement in opposition to learning standards and aligned assessments, the sheer multitude of tests and test prep occurring in schools, and a reaction to teachers' concerns about the overreliance of student test scores in their evaluations. When states rolled out new assessments aligned to college and career ready standards in 2015, the number of students opting out of the tests rose significantly. Those numbers have subsided in recent years, but debates about whether parents should have the right to opt their children out of assessments persist.

Proponents of annual testing argue that the information gathered provides specific data on minority students, English language learners, low-income students, and students with disabilities; identifies achievement gaps; and shows where schools are having great success. High-quality assessments can generate important data and provide valuable information about student progress to teachers and parents, support accountability, promote high expectations, and encourage equity for students of color and low-income students. With student data also being factored into teacher and principal evaluations, a high number of opt-outs would affect those performance measures and increase the likelihood that educators receive inaccurate ratings and face unjustified consequences.

National Principals Association Position

- National Principals Association has a long-standing position in support of national standards that will ensure students are college and career ready upon graduation from high school.
- National Principals Association is opposed to state and district policies that allow parents to opt their children out of standardized assessments, and it remains committed to high-quality assessments to improve teaching and learning.
- National Principals Association's vision of quality assessments and proposed recommendations is outlined in its High-Stakes Assessment policy issue brief.
- National Principals Association believes that assessments must be varied, are an integral part of the learning process, and should be used regularly to ensure that instruction promotes student success.
- National Principals Association believes that next generation assessments, aligned to college and career ready standards, provide a better assessment of what a student knows and is able to do; measure what students actually need to be college and career ready; set a common benchmark across schools, districts, and states; demonstrate current achievement and growth; report on multiple measures of student performance; should be tailored to the student's ability; provide schools with more data to inform instruction; and reduce the security issues that paper tests present.
- National Principals Association believes that data has the power to transform teaching and learning by helping educators identify and provide supports to all students, assisting teachers and school leaders in improving their instructional practices, and informing school improvement activities.

Recommendations for Federal Policymakers

- Conduct research on the consequences, both intended and unintended, of high-stakes testing and its impact on the promotion, retention, and evaluation of students, teachers, principals, schools, and school districts.
- Provide funding for states and districts to audit their assessment systems, including the number of tests and time spent on test-taking to reduce redundant or unnecessary state and district assessments.

Recommendations for State Policymakers

- Invest in high-quality assessments that contain fewer multiple-choice items and more constructed responses that require students to not only know but be able to apply key concepts to unique situations.
- Annually review the time spent by school districts on conducting state and local assessments to help limit the number of tests to the minimum amount required to obtain the critical information needed to improve student learning.
- Clearly articulate to school districts, principals, teachers, students, and parents how state assessment results will be used to improve the education of all children.
- Publicly provide information outlining the purpose of state assessments and the potential consequences to districts and schools if they do not meet their 95% participation rate as required by federal law.

- Use multiple measures of student growth in evaluating school, principal, and teacher performance, including non-assessment measures such as:
 - Portfolios, performance tasks, and other examples of a student's accomplishments
 - Comprehensive personal academic and graduation plans
 - Project-based learning assignments
 - Attendance rates
 - Discipline referrals
 - Graduation rates
- Collect and disseminate data on which students are opting out of state assessments and the impact on instructional practices, teacher and principal evaluations, and school accountability.

Recommendations for District Policymakers

- Communicate directly with parents to help them understand the value of college and career ready standards and changes that will be made for teaching and learning in schools.
- Evaluate all assessments required by the district and consult teachers and principals to determine what data they find most valuable to their instructional practice and school improvement efforts.
- Provide information to parents and the community about the purpose of all tests students are taking, whether they are required by the state or the district, and how much time students will spend on the assessments.

Recommendations for School Leaders

- Ensure teachers are provided with and obtain professional learning opportunities to interpret assessment data and use it to effectively inform instruction, advance learning, accommodate individual learning needs, and monitor student progress.
- Meaningfully engage parents and families in two-way communication regarding assessments, including how schools and families can work together to use assessment data to support student growth and learning.