

Opting Out of State Standardized Tests

A fact sheet from
Citizens for Public Schools



What is “opting out”?

It means refusing to take a standardized test such as MCAS.

Why should I opt my student out?

To protect your child: For many students, the Big Test can be very stressful.

To improve education for all students: Opting out is an effective way to protest the overuse and misuse of standardized tests, which forces schools to focus on the demands of the tests instead of the needs of students. Test obsession eats up classroom time, narrows curriculum, destroys children’s love of learning, and fuels the school-to-prison pipeline.

Seattle teacher activist Jesse Hagopian gives another reason: “We know that high-stakes standardized tests, rather than reducing the opportunity gap, have been used to rank, sort, label, and punish students of color. ... The outcomes [show] that test score achievement gaps between African American and white students have only increased, not decreased. If the point of the testing is to highlight inequality and fix it, so far it has only increased inequality.”

The opt-out movement has led to changes in state and local testing policies in other states. It can work here, too.

Is opting out illegal?

No. State law says the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education must *give* tests to all students. But **the law does not say every student must *take* those tests and it does not provide for any penalties** to students who refuse, or their parents. Former Commissioner Mitchell Chester said publicly, *“I haven’t used the word ‘illegal’ [about students opting out].”*

What will my child do while the tests are administered?

State officials have told schools that if a student refuses the test, they should be allowed to read or do homework.

Will opting out affect my child’s academic standing?

Passing the state high school tests is a requirement for a high school diploma. But **there is no state penalty for students who opt out in grades 3 – 8**. Some schools use the scores in choosing students for advanced work, but most do not. Check whether your school does. Email lesstestingmorelearning@gmail.com if you have questions.

Will opting out cause my student's school to lose federal or state funding?

No. Parents have been told this, but it has never happened and there is no reason to think it will. The federal government has never required financial penalties. New York State has had at least 20% of its students opting out for the past two years, and despite some federal bluster, no New York school lost any money. Massachusetts officials have never indicated they would cut district or school funding.

Will my school be hurt in other ways?

A school's accountability "level" can be affected if participation drops below 90 or 95 percent, depending on the school's position in the state's complex rating system. But serious sanctions only apply to schools in Level 4 or 5, and that's a matter of test scores — not participation rates.

How can I opt out my child?

Send the principal a letter saying you don't want your child to take the test. For example:

"Dear —, I have asked my child, [name], not to take part in the [name the exam] this year. Please arrange for [him or her] to have a productive educational experience during the testing period."

Many parents' opt-out letters are honored, but just in case, you may also want to send your child to school with a note to read to the test proctor, something like this: "My parent told me not to take this test." Or print that message on a sticker your child can wear on clothing. There's a model sticker at <http://bit.ly/optout2018>.

A 2016 memo from former Education Commissioner Mitchell Chester says, "We ask principals and test proctors to handle refusals with sensitivity. Students should not be pressured to take the test, nor should they be punished for not taking the test." See <http://bit.ly/refusethetest>.

Although the commissioner did not repeat this line in his 2017 testing instructions, DESE has not rescinded the 2016 policy, which is common sense. It would be very unusual for a school official to berate or threaten a student for following a parent's written instructions.

How can I make my action have real impact?

One parent quietly opting out will not stop high-stakes testing. It's important to join with other parents and let people know what you are doing and why. Tell your newspaper, parent organizations, school committee, and legislators. Use parent email networks.

Citizensforpublicschools.org links to more materials about opting out and the *Less Testing, More Learning* campaign. Please keep us informed of what you are doing. Email lesstestingmorelearning@gmail.com. We will not release any information without permission.

Citizens for Public Schools
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