

# 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 [like New York](#). It can work here, too.

## 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 2017 [memo](#) from former Acting Education Commissioner Jeff Wulfson says, “Students should not be forced to take the test against their will.” A 2016 memo said, “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Although the acting commissioner did not repeat the 2016 statement in his 2017 testing instructions, DESE has not rescinded the 2016 policy, which is common sense.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.

### Is opting out illegal?

**No.** State law says the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education must *give* tests to all students. But **state 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. In some districts, the policy is that students must sit in front of their computers for 15 minutes, but if they have not started taking the test by then, they can read. At least one district ([Somerville](#)) specifies that the test proctor should tell the student that the proctor knows the student is not going to take the test, and that the proctor should not encourage the student to take the test.

### 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](mailto: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 said they would cut district or school funding.

### Will my school be hurt in other ways?

A school's state rating can be affected if participation of any subgroup of students, such as a racial subgroup, drops below [95 percent](#). But no school has ever suffered state takeover or intervention because of low participation and there is no state law that would permit such action even if state officials wanted to.

### 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. This creates more political power and also makes it less likely that individual families or students will be criticized. Tell your newspaper, parent organizations, school committee, and legislators. Use parent email networks. Reach out to Citizens for Public Schools at [lesstestingmorelearning@gmail.com](mailto:lesstestingmorelearning@gmail.com) to let us know what your plans are, and if you would like our support.

[Citizensforpublicschools.org](http://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](mailto:lesstestingmorelearning@gmail.com). We will not release any information without permission.

**Citizens for Public Schools**  
Parents, teachers, and other Massachusetts residents  
working to improve public education for all children.  
Visit us at [www.citizensforpublicschools.org](http://www.citizensforpublicschools.org).

