

Opting Out

of State Standardized Tests During COVID

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](#).

To resist racist policies: Dr. Ibram X. Kendi, author of the book *How to Be an Antiracist*, says, “Standardized tests have become the most effective racist weapon ever devised to objectively degrade Black minds and legally exclude their bodies.”

Testing during the COVID pandemic makes no sense: The time and resources required to test students this year would be better spent educating and supporting them; the results won’t be valid, reliable or useful; and there are better ways to gauge how students are doing. Many schools are closed for safety. Even where they are open, the state’s desire to generate statistics is not a good reason to risk a child’s health. The Mass. Association of School Committees has called on state officials to cancel the tests this spring.

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 (if they are learning in person) with a note to read to the test proctor, something like this: “My parent told me not to take this test.”

Is opting out legal?

Yes. 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.

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. At least one district ([Somerville](#)) specifies that the test proctor should tell the student that

he/she/they know the student is not going to take the test, and that the proctor should not encourage the student to take the test. If a student is learning remotely, they can simply read or do other activities during testing time.

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**. For the graduating class of 2021, the state has modified requirements so that students can pass an approved, related course instead of passing the math or ELA MCAS exam. (Students in grades 3-8 this year will also have shortened MCAS testing time.) 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 several 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. And in light of the pandemic, Commissioner Riley announced that he will not recommend any new underperforming or chronically underperforming districts or schools in the upcoming school year, 2021-22.

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 to let us know what your plans are, and if you would like our support.

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.

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