

Assessment Opt-Out

What are states doing to mitigate the trend of parents keeping their children out of statewide assessments?

Over the last few years, the United States has seen growing opposition to statewide assessments, as evidenced in the increasing numbers of parents (or guardians) who are deciding not to have their children participate in this testing.¹ In 2015, parents “opted out” approximately 20 percent of New York students from statewide assessments,^{2,3,4} and the opt-out movement continues to grow in other states.^{5,6} At the same time, federal law requires that states assess at least 95 percent of their students.^{7,8}

The Center on Standards and Assessment Implementation (CSAI) recently reviewed relevant resources to find out how states are dealing with this issue. The goal of this review is to provide useful information to states and education organizations, leading to quality education policies and practices.



1 Strauss, V. (2016, January 31). The testing opt-out movement is growing, despite government efforts to kill it. The Washington Post. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2016/01/31/the-testing-opt-out-movement-is-growing-despite-government-efforts-to-kill-it/>

2 ibid.

3 Camera, L. (2016, March 24). As test time nears, coalition tries to head off opt-outs. US News. Retrieved from <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-03-24/coalition-tries-to-head-off-the-testing-opt-out-movement>

4 Harris, E. A. (2015, August 12). 20% of New York State students opted out of standardized tests this year. New York Times. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/13/nyregion/new-york-state-students-standardized-tests.html>

5 Strauss, op. cit.

6 Kamenetz, A. (2015). Anti-test ‘opt-out’ movement makes a wave in New York State. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/04/20/400396254/anti-test-opt-out-movement-makes-a-wave-in-new-york-state>

7 McIntyre, E. (2016, January 29). Ed Dept threatens penalties for states with high opt-out rates. Education DIVE. Retrieved from <http://www.educationdive.com/news/ed-dept-threatens-penalties-for-states-with-high-opt-out-rates/412942/>

8 Strauss, op. cit.

State Opt-Out Policies

Of the 50 states that were scanned, plus the District of Columbia (DC), only six states affirmatively allow parents to have their children opted out of statewide assessments. The following table presents information from these five states.

STATE	
California	<p>Opting out is allowed without restrictions.</p> <p>Parents are required to provide a written opt-out request to the school.</p> <p>School districts provide parents, teachers, and students with easily understood information about the state assessments.</p> <p>The state regularly communicates with educators on issues related to opting out.</p>
Colorado	<p>Districts are required to adopt a written policy and procedure allowing parents to excuse their students from participating in state assessments.</p> <p>Districts cannot impose negative consequences on students who do not participate in assessments.</p> <p>Districts cannot discourage students from taking assessments or encourage parents to excuse their student from assessments.</p> <p>Districts and schools with low assessment participation rates will have to address how to improve those rates in plans submitted to the state.</p>
Oregon	<p>Opting out is allowed without restrictions.</p> <p>The districts' notification to parents/guardians of the right to opt out explains the purpose of assessments, the learning targets that are reflected in the assessments, and the differences between performance levels on the assessments.</p> <p>The opt-out request form contains information on the purpose and value of statewide assessments.</p>
Pennsylvania	<p>Opting out is allowed for religious reasons only.</p> <p>Parents who choose to opt out their children must review the paper version of the assessment that their children would take, and that review must take place in a district building with a district representative present.</p>
Utah	<p>Opting out is allowed for a limited number of assessments.</p>
Wisconsin	<p>Opting out is allowed for students in grades 4 and 8–11.</p>

All of the other 44 states, and DC, have provisions in their laws or policies that specifically require student participation in statewide assessments at certain grade levels for certain subjects, and do not have any provisions or processes for opting out; however, they do not have explicit language prohibiting parents from opting their children out of the assessments. Moreover, five states (Maine, Minnesota, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Washington) have policies that allow parents to refuse statewide assessments for their children. The difference between this and opting out is that when opting out is allowed, there are no student consequences for non-participation in the assessment(s); in contrast, states that allow parents to refuse statewide assessments for their children do not exempt the students from any potential consequences of non-participation, such as not advancing to the next grade or not receiving a diploma.

9 nprEd: <http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/>

10 PBS Newshour: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour>

11 U.S. News & World Report: <http://www.usnews.com/>

12 The Washington Post: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>

13 National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE). (2015). Policy update: Opt out policies by state. Retrieved from http://www.nasbe.org/wp-content/uploads/Lorenzo_Opt-Outs-by-State.pdf

Opt-Out Resources and Information

A number of states are concerned about the trend toward higher rates of opting out. Even in states that do not allow opting out, local school districts are receiving opt-out requests, and regardless of state policy on this issue, some parents are simply taking their children out of school during assessment windows. Thus, most states have created resources to reduce opt-out rates or, put another way, to keep assessment rates at the required levels.

Most state department of education websites provide information about statewide assessments, including, for example, the purposes of the assessments, scoring information, and/or guides to interpreting and understanding the results. However, not all states offer short, easily understandable formats of information designed for families; instead, the only information that some states provide is in lengthy, more technical documents, such as administration manuals, blueprints, technical reports, training presentations, and other materials for assessment administrators and coordinators. In addition to the aforementioned types of assessment resources, some states provide resources specifically focused local districts, including, for example, a sample letter that local districts can customize and provide to families who have requested to opt out, and guidance documents on how districts should respond to opt-out requests.

Resources Designed for Families

Thirty-one states have developed short and easily understandable materials for families about statewide assessments (e.g., parent guides, brochures, and/or frequently asked questions with non-technical answers).

Customizable Sample Letters

Eighteen states provide sample letters for local school districts, which can be customized and sent to parents who request to opt their students out. These sample letters may include descriptions of statewide assessments, explain the relevant laws or policies on opting out, and/or explain the consequences of students not participating in statewide assessments.

Guidance Documents

Fifteen states provide guidance documents for local school districts in relation to opting out. Of these states, nine provide explicit guidance on how to communicate with families, such as suggesting that districts give families information about laws and policies on opting out, information designed to alleviate concerns about standardized assessments, and/or an explanation of the purposes, value, and importance of statewide assessments. The other six states provide more general guidance, explaining the consequences of opting out, as well as providing information on relevant laws and policies.

For detailed information about states' opt-out legislation/policies and efforts to reduce opt-out rates, please read the full report on the [CSAI website](#).



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