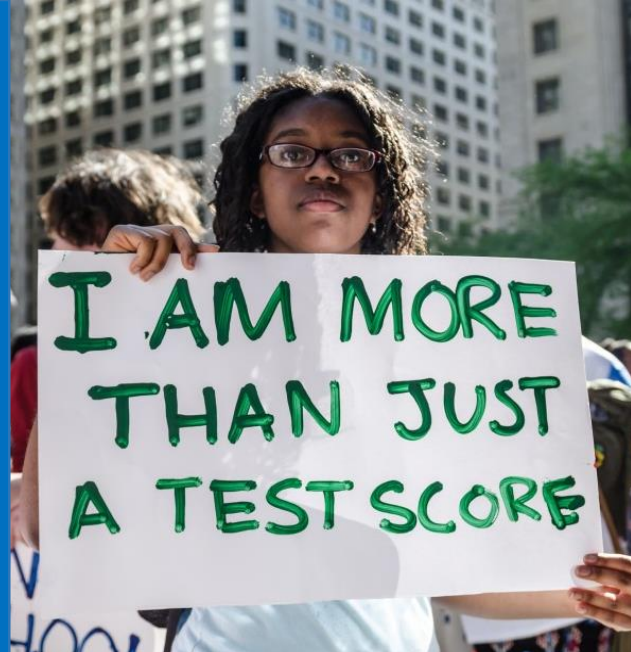


Testing Reform Victories 2015: *Growing Grassroots Movement Rolls Back Testing Overkill*



FairTest

The National Center for Fair & Open Testing

Testing Reform Victories 2015:

Growing Grassroots Movement Rolls Back Testing Overkill

by Lisa Guisbond with Monty Neill and Bob Schaeffer

A Report by The National Center for Fair & Open Testing

FairTest,
P.O. Box 300204, Boston, MA 02130
www.fairtest.org

November 2015

Testing Reform Victories 2015:

Growing Grassroots Movement Rolls Back Testing Overkill

By Lisa Guisbond with Monty Neill and Bob Schaeffer

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
I. More States Abandon Failed Graduation Test Policies	5
II. Test-Based Grade Retention on Trial	8
III. Victories for Less Testing	9
IV. Opting Out Explodes Across the Country	13
V. Public Opinion Moves Strongly Toward Less Testing, More Learning	18
VI. Test-Optional College Admissions Movement Surges	20
VII. First Steps Toward Better Assessment & Accountability Systems	21
VIII. Grassroots Pressure Must Continue to Build Momentum for Change	23
References	24

Acknowledgements:

Cover Photos by Sarah-ji, Elliott Stoller, and Woodson Maher
Report Design and layout by David Mirabella

Testing Reform Victories 2015:

Growing Grassroots Movement Rolls Back Testing Overkill

By Lisa Guisbond

The growing strength and sophistication of the U.S. testing resistance and reform movement began turning the tide against standardized exam overuse and misuse during the 2014-2015 school year. Assessment reformers scored significant wins in many states, thanks to intense pressure brought by unprecedented waves of opting out and other forms of political action. Even President Obama and Secretary of Education Duncan, long advocates of test-and-punish 'reform' strategies, now concede that "there is too much testing."

Across the country, educators, parents and students launched petitions, organized mass rallies and held public forums. High school students refused to take excessive exams and walked out. Teachers struck to demand (and win) testing reforms and better learning conditions. Administrators and elected school boards adopted strong resolutions against high-stakes testing. All this growth built on the [successes of test reformers](#) in previous years.

Parents and teachers who launched campaigns against standardized exam overkill in their schools and districts have emerged as effective leaders who continue to build a stronger movement. The mainstream media no longer ignores or marginalizes calls for "less testing, more learning" and "an end to high-stakes testing." Instead, the assessment reform movement and the reasons behind it are [consistently covered in depth](#) by major newspapers, TV and radio outlets from coast to coast.

Public opinion shows a powerful shift against overreliance on test-and-punish policies and in favor of assessment reform based on multiple measures. Education policy makers and legislators have been forced to respond by at least publicly acknowledging the harms of high-stakes testing and the need for a course correction.

Cries of "enough is enough" were loud enough to penetrate the Oval Office, prompting President Obama to acknowledge in October that high-stakes exams are out of control in U.S. public schools. Activists, however, continue to push to ensure that vague rhetoric from the nation's capital is followed by concrete changes in policy. The Obama administration has refused to end its test-and-punish policies, so Congress must act. Both houses have passed bills to end the mandates for test-based teacher evaluations and school and district sanctions.

Meanwhile, the movement has won concrete victories at the state and local level. These include repeal of exit exams in several states, elimination of many tests, reduction of testing time, a

surge of colleges going test-optional, and development of alternative assessment and accountability systems. The past year's victories include:

- A sharp *reversal of the decades-long trend to adopt high school exit exams*. Policy-makers repealed the California graduation test, while Texas loosened its requirements, joining six states that repealed or delayed these exams in the 2013-2014 school year. California, Georgia, South Carolina and Arizona also decided to grant diplomas retroactively to thousands of students denied them because of test scores.
- Florida *suspended Jeb Bush's 3rd grade reading test-based promotion policy*. Oklahoma, New York, and North Carolina revised their test-based promotion policies, and New Mexico legislators blocked the governor's effort to impose one.
- States and districts that *rolled back mandated testing* include Minnesota, Virginia, Florida, Colorado, Maryland, Dallas and Lee County, Florida.
- *Opting out surged to new levels* in New York, New Jersey and across the country – approaching 500,000 nationally – riveting the attention of the media and pushing governors and legislatures to act.
- A series of opinion polls *documented increasing numbers of voters and parents who agree there is too much standardized testing* and it should not be used for high-stakes purposes.
- The past year was the best one on record for the test-optional college admissions movement, with *three dozen more colleges and universities reducing or eliminating ACT/SAT requirements, driving the total to more than 850*.
- In California, New Hampshire, and elsewhere there are *promising efforts to develop alternative systems of assessment and accountability*, deemphasizing standardized tests while incorporating multiple measures of school performance.

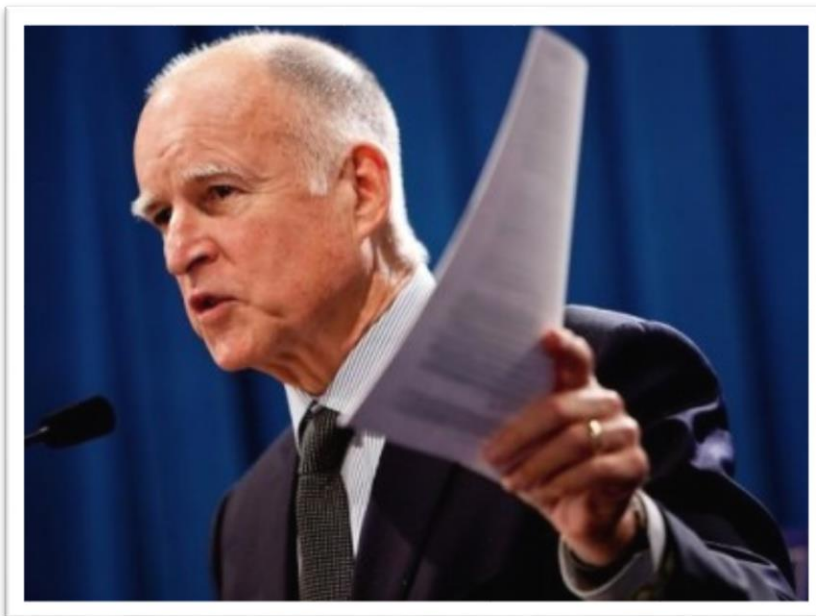
The movement's growth and accomplishments are tremendously encouraging. But it's far too early to declare victory and go home. In the 2015-2016 school year, activists will use lessons learned from their initial battles to further expand and strengthen the resistance movement and ensure political leaders go beyond lip service to implement meaningful assessment reforms.

The movement's ultimate goal goes well beyond winning less testing, lower stakes and better assessments. It seeks a democratic transformation of public education from a system driven by a narrow "test-and-punish" agenda to one that meets the broad educational needs and goals of diverse students and families.

I. MORE STATES ABANDON FAILED GRADUATION TEST POLICIES

Reversing a decades-long trend, several states dropped or cut back their counter-productive high school exit exam requirements over the past two academic years (See FairTest's report, [Testing Reform Victories: The First Wave](#).) Some states, including California, South Carolina, Georgia and Arizona, even decided to grant diplomas retroactively, a testament to the growing recognition that young adults deserve restitution for the harm they suffered from these testing mandates. Here are some highlights:

- **Georgia** legislators righted a wrong done to students who had completed all high school requirements but were denied diplomas based on graduation test scores. Building on a state Board of Education decision to eliminate the graduation exam in 2011, a new law grants diplomas retroactively to more than 10,000 Georgians. Garry McGiboney, associate superintendent for policy for the Georgia Department of Education, said, "Those are people now that can get a job, get a promotion, go into the military."
- Thousands of **Arizonans** who were denied high school diplomas based on the state's AIMS (Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards) test, imposed in 2006, can get retroactive diplomas if they had fulfilled all other graduation requirements. Governor Doug Ducey signed legislation mandating the change in February 2015. Between 2,000 and 5,000 students are expected to be eligible for retroactive diplomas.



Governor Jerry Brown signed a bill granting diplomas retroactively to as many as 32,000 students. Photo by LA School Report.

- Governor Jerry Brown signed a bill in August 2015 exempting **California** high school students in the Class of 2015 from the state graduation exam. Thousands had been left in limbo after the state board canceled a retest. Many faced the withdrawal of college admissions,

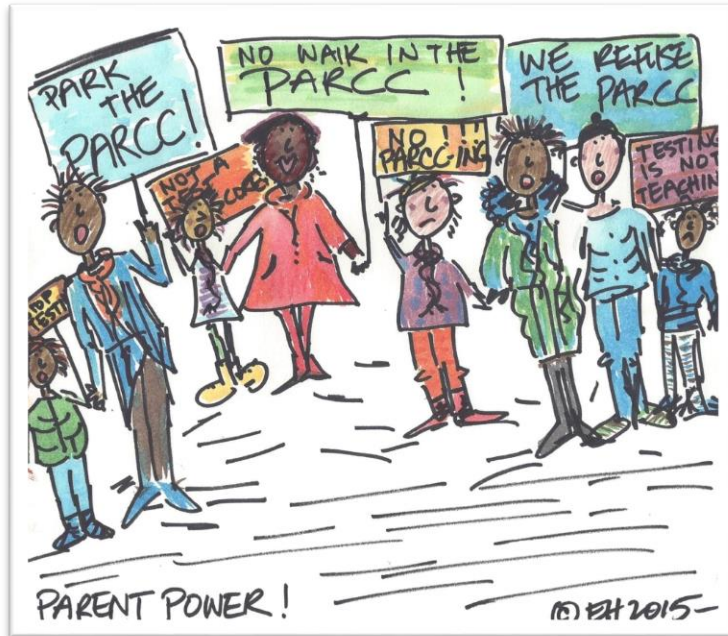
job and military opportunities. In September, the California legislature approved and sent a bill to Gov. Brown to suspend the graduation test through 2017-18. The bill also grants diplomas retroactively to students who passed all other graduation requirements, going back as far as the Class of 2006, the first year students were required to pass the high school exit exam. As many as 32,000 students could be eligible.

- **Texas** took another positive step by reducing its graduation requirement from five tests to three. The onerous five-test requirement had put 10% of the Class of 2015, or 28,000 seniors, at risk of not graduating. After nearly three decades of graduation testing and other forms of test misuse by the state of Texas, the Texas testing resistance movement has begun to rack up incremental yet significant victories, thanks to the concerted efforts of parents, students, school boards, superintendents and a former state education commissioner. Activists won legislation scrapping 10 out of 15 planned end-of-course exams two years ago. The new exemptions will expire in September 2017, unless renewed by lawmakers.
- **Minnesota** legislators voted to repeal high school graduation tests a year earlier than originally planned, effective in 2015-16. (The legislature originally voted in favor of repeal in 2013.)
- The **Mississippi** State Board of Education voted in March 2015 to stop requiring high school students to pass end-of-course tests in Algebra I, English II, Biology and U.S. History to graduate. The legislature's education committee was preparing a bill that would have done the same thing if the board had not acted. Rep. Deborah Dixon sponsored the legislation. "I authored this bill to give young kids an opportunity to be successful," Dixon said. "Some students just do not test well. They have success on every front, except standardized test taking. They should not be penalized" (Le Coz, 2015). Thirteen percent of the Class of 2015, 3,156 students, had been at risk of not graduating due to the tests. The change meant members of the Class of 2015 could graduate if they showed "mastery of course content," taking into account both the test



score and their course grade. Seniors in the Class of 2016 must either achieve a combined minimum score from all four tests, or they can “apply for graduation by demonstrating mastery.” In 2016-17, subject test scores will count for 25% of students’ final grade.

- In **New Jersey**, parents, education activists and civil rights advocates struck back against the state’s move to eliminate a long-standing alternative path to graduation, one that helped thousands of English language learners and others demonstrate their competency to graduate.



Cartoon by New Jersey parent activist Elana Halberstadt.

Parents, backed by the American Civil Liberties

Union of New Jersey (ACLU-NJ) and the Education Law Center (ELC), sued the state for eliminating the existing exit exam and alternative assessment and adopting the PARCC, SAT and other standardized tests for graduation, without adequate input from parents and educators or following the required legal steps for changing state graduation policies. The New Jersey Department of Education’s proposals would make New Jersey the first state to use PARCC tests as a graduation standard for 2016 by *retroactively* applying a still-to-be-determined cut score to last spring’s test results.

[No more than 20 states now require graduation tests](#), down from more than half at the beginning of the decade (Zinth, 2015). Researchers have consistently found that these tests do not help prepare students for college or career or close gaps in achievement. Instead, they increase the dropout rate (Hout and Elliott, 2011). Activist parents, teachers and students have marshaled this data, shared stories of the [harm caused by these exams](#), and pushed for positive change.

II. TEST-BASED GRADE RETENTION ON TRIAL

It's a victory whenever [punitive practices](#) that keep students from advancing to the next grade based on test scores are reversed. The news from Florida this year is especially significant, since that state's assessment policies, including grade promotion exams, have been a model for the national test-and-punish school "reform" movement.

- **Florida** lawmakers voted to suspend former Governor (and current presidential



Opt Out Florida Network members gathered after speaking out against high-stakes testing at a state Board of Education meeting. Photo by Sandy Stenoff.

candidate) Jeb Bush's 1999 education law requiring third graders to be held back if they failed the state reading exam. This is just a one-year pause meant to allow the state to review its Common Core-based Florida Standards Assessment, but many educators and parents are fighting to make it permanent. Years of research show that grade retention has long-term negative consequences for students and no long-term benefits. In Florida, the retention policy disproportionately affected students of color.

- **Oklahoma** passed a law this year to revise the state's test-based retention policy. The new law allows "reading teams," including the child's teachers and parents, to override the results of a reading test and allow students to advance from third to fourth grade based on other evidence of the student's reading ability.
- Last year, **North Carolina** and **New York** reformed their test-based promotion policies. This year, in **New Mexico**, legislators blocked the governor's move to impose a grade promotion exam policy.

III. VICTORIES FOR LESS TESTING

Testing reform activists want an end to the high-stakes uses of standardized exams, and they want to reverse the proliferation of tests imposed by districts seeking to ensure their students pass state and federally-mandated tests. In response to such recent actions as a teacher strike in Seattle, the massive opt-out wave, and other forms of advocacy, education policymakers and politicians are beginning to address the call for “less testing, more learning.”

A survey by the Council of Chief State School Officers (2015) found that 39 of 50 states reported they were working to reduce the amount of testing. Amid nationwide complaints about test overload and confusion, the rapidly shrinking PARCC Common Core consortium (down to seven states and the District of Columbia out of the original 24 states) announced it would cut back by eliminating its March wave of math and reading exams. Massive numbers of students opted out of New York’s locally designed Common Core exams, prompting state officials to announce they would trim testing time for students in every grade (Harris, 2015). Other states also made substantive moves to reduce the flood of testing.

- As the 2015-16 school year started, **Seattle** teachers went on strike for better working conditions and better learning conditions for their students, including guaranteed recess time, which had been squeezed out by over-testing. With strong support from parents and the broader community, they won on a number of critical fronts: a joint union-district committee will review the amount of testing and recommend changes; student test scores will no longer be used in the district’s teacher evaluations¹; and elementary school students will be guaranteed 30 minutes of recess. Seattle history teacher and activist Jesse Hagopian noted the widespread support of parents for the union demands, adding, “I know that we have

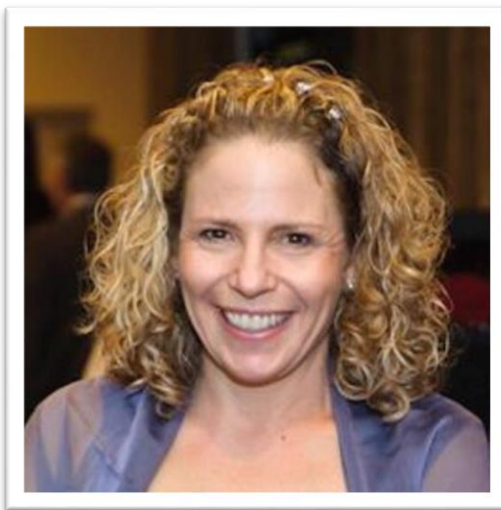


Striking Seattle teachers won support from parents for a committee to review testing and recommend changes. Photo by Elliott Stoller.

¹ Federal waivers from No Child Left Behind require states to judge teachers by student test scores, but Washington state law bars the state from mandating test scores in teacher evaluations.

transformed our union, city politics, and the labor movement for the better. Our movement is just the beginning.”

- **Minnesota** lawmakers cut the budget for state testing nearly in half (from \$42 million over two years to \$28 million) and reduced the amount of required state testing ². Legislators capped testing at 10 hours per elementary school student and 11 hours per middle and high school student per year. Students will still take state math exams in grades 3 through 8 and 11 and reading in grades 3 through 8 and 10, as required by federal law, but practice exams for the state tests will be eliminated. Governor Mark Dayton said he wants to reduce testing further, by one third, but needs federal approval to do so because of the requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB).
- Responding to assessment reform pressure from parents and educators, **Virginia** Governor Terry McAuliffe signed a bill to reduce the amount of state testing. The law, which passed the legislature with overwhelming support, eliminates five exams taken in elementary and middle schools, cutting the total from 22 to 17 (three more than NCLB requires). Gone will be third grade social studies and science, fifth grade writing, and two U.S. history exams. Districts will replace the exams with project-based alternative assessments to demonstrate student learning.



Colorado parent activist Ilana Spiegel served on a task force that recommended changes to testing policy. Photo by David Anderson.

- **Colorado** activists won modest test-reduction victories with the passage of a bill that reduces high school testing in grades 10, 11 and 12. The new law also eliminates reading tests for some children in kindergarten through third grade, while leaving fourth through 8th grade testing mostly intact. The result will be an estimated 30 fewer hours of testing between kindergarten and 12th grade. Ilana Spiegel, a parent representative on a task force that made recommendations to lawmakers, said she was pleased in the end even though — in her view — the actual reductions were minimal. “I see it being crystal clear who is listening to parents and educators and students and who is not —

² The authors relied primarily on state and local news clips for information and changes in state policy.

and that has become much more apparent to the public," she said. "Parents and educators and students, people directly impacted by policy decisions, are going to have more influence on shaping these policy decisions."

- The largest school district in **North Carolina**, Wake County, reduced its barrage of locally mandated exams from three in each of three academic subjects per year to one exam each in language arts, math and science, beginning in the 2015-16 school year. Eliminated were the interim exams many districts impose to ensure students are on track to do well on the state's end-of-grade and end-of-course exams.
- In Texas, the **Dallas** Independent School District, under pressure from fed-up parents and school trustees, got rid of exams in art, music and physical education in kindergarten through second grade. Parents objected to their students taking additional tests that would be used to grade their teachers. DISD also urged schools to reduce practice tests used to prepare for state exams.
- In **New Jersey**, four bills to limit high-stakes standardized testing passed the Assembly with strong, bipartisan votes, thanks to enormous public pressure and concerted action by grassroots activists. Despite overwhelming support from senators as well as educators and parents, however, the bills were blocked by the chair of the Senate education committee, Teresa Ruiz. [Legislation](#) prohibiting the administration of standardized tests by districts to students in grades K-2 did, however, pass unanimously in both houses of the legislature and awaits Governor Christie's signature.
- A vigorous grass roots campaign in **Florida** to reduce testing overkill resulted in



Florida's grass roots campaign has gained momentum to roll back state test requirements.

Governor Rick Scott signing a law that eliminated the 11th grade state English exam and removed a requirement for districts to create exams for every subject not covered by the state test. It also called for a limit on the number of hours spent on state-mandated tests and for outside experts to review the state's new Florida Standards Assessments before they could be used for high stakes decisions.

- In **Lee County, FL**, the district's new superintendent answered the call for less testing at his first school board meeting. Dr. Greg Adkins announced the elimination of all district-mandated "interim" tests, leaving only the state-required high-stakes exams. His move affects students in every grade. It cuts testing time from six to two-and-a-half hours for first graders and from 19 to 13 hours for ninth graders. "I think one of the things we really need to focus on is really getting to what is important, which is the kid, and teaching the kid," said Adkins (Lazar, 2015). Florida's statewide association of school superintendents overwhelmingly adopted a [resolution](#) saying its members had "lost confidence" in the state's high-stakes-test-driven assessment system.



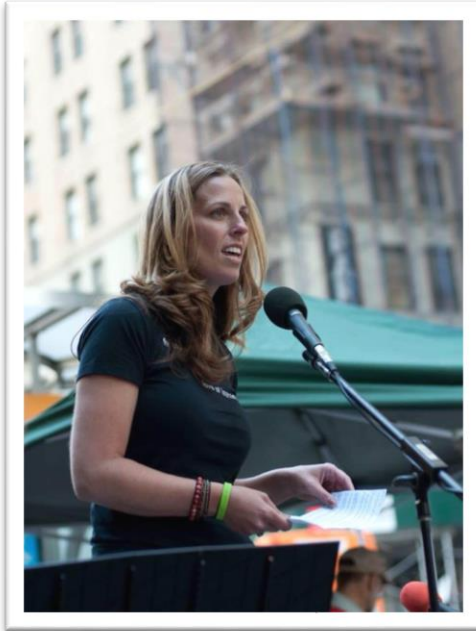
Standing up for less testing in Massachusetts, at the HONK! Festival. Photo by Amy Colwell Todd.

- **Boston's** new superintendent, **Tommy Chang**, announced as the school year started that the district would cut back on "predictive" tests, exams used to gauge students' progress toward the high-stakes spring exams. Instead, Chang said he wanted the district to incorporate performance-based assessments. "Multiple-choice is not a performance," he said. "Writing an essay is a performance. Having a debate in class is a performance.

Being able to read a piece of text and make an argument based on the text — that's a performance" (Fox, 2015).

- **Maryland's** most populous school district, one of the largest in the nation, decided to eliminate its high school final exams. In response to widespread concerns about too much time spent testing, the Montgomery County school board voted unanimously to eliminate end-of-semester exams and replace them with shorter assessments that will be given throughout the semester and can take multiple forms, including essays, portfolios, projects or tests. Board President Patricia O'Neill explained that, since the district could not control the amount of federally mandated testing, this was a logical way to address the problem. Michael Petrilli, a Montgomery parent and president of the conservative, pro-testing Thomas B. Fordham Institute, agreed. "This seems like an appropriate response to a system that wasn't working, and particularly at a time when there was so much anxiety about testing in the county," he said (St. George, 2015). However, the state still requires students to pass four exit exams (TAMSA, 2014-15).

IV. OPTING OUT EXPLODES ACROSS THE COUNTRY



Jeanette Deutermann helped launch a New York opt-out movement of 240,000.
Photo by Bianca Tanis.

An estimated half a million students opted out of standardized tests nationwide this past school year, a surge of participation in what some call civil disobedience and others view as parents exercising their basic rights to protect children from the consequences of harmful test misuse. Long Island parent organizer Jeanette Deutermann said opting out is a way of being an “upstander,” not a bystander. It’s a way to say it is *not OK* to harm our own and other people’s children by misusing and overusing these flawed exams (2015). As in 2014, New York once again led in the scope of resistance in 2015, with an estimated 240,000 refusals on both the state math and reading exams. There was also significant participation in the opt-out movement in New Jersey, New Mexico, Colorado, Pennsylvania,

Oregon, Maine, Illinois, Washington and California. Here are some of the highlights.

- Thanks to outstanding parent organizers throughout **New York State**, an estimated 20% of public school students opted out of state exams in grades 3-8. According to state data compiled by Chris Cerrone, a Western New York educator and school board member, [just 27 out of 700 districts had 95% participation in testing](#) (2015). (Click [here](#) to see district-by-district numbers.) This rendered the resulting data useless in many districts, which was precisely the purpose. “We always said that compliance just means more of the same,” said Deutermann. “The hope was to disrupt it to the point where it cannot be used,” to where “there are not enough children taking the test to close a school, or not enough data to fire a teacher” (Harris, 2015).

Before, during and after testing season, parents and organizers faced threats, intimidation and misinformation about the potential loss of federal funding for their schools.³ Despite their initial rhetoric, state and federal education officials ultimately

³ NCLB says that 95% of students must take the test or the school will fail to make “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) and then suffer sanctions. However, this provision is now essentially irrelevant because most states now have waivers and schools that don’t receive Title 1 funds are exempt.

conceded that [there would be no loss of Title 1 funds](#) as a result of the test refusals. Governor Cuomo criticized his State Education Department's implementation of the Common Core standards and tests, announcing as children returned to school the [establishment of a commission](#) to look into and solve the problems. Cuomo has pushed hard to increase the weight of student scores in judging teachers and excluded critical voices from his commission, so test reform activists reacted with skepticism. New York State Allies for Public Education (2015) released a statement saying, "Cuomo



A rally organized by the New York State Allies for Public Education. Photo by The Journal News.

announced yesterday another politically motivated and biased Commission to raise his poll ratings -- with no representation from parents who led the Opt Out movement, early education classroom teachers, or Common Core critics of any kind. New Yorkers across the state are outraged but hardly surprised by Cuomo's disregard for the people's voice."

Nonetheless, it is clear that the New York opt out movement has caught the attention of education and political leaders and will continue to hold their feet to the fire. [Activists are organizing](#) more parents to opt their children out of the tests in 2016.

- **New Jersey** also saw tens of thousands of students opt out of state PARCC testing, 50,000 to 55,000 or more, up from around 1,000 the previous year. High school refusals were the greatest share, with some building's opt-out rates reaching 70%. (Press reports said the high school refusals averaged 15% statewide.) This leap in non-participation was bolstered by a pause in the requirement that students pass a graduation test (see page 7). Parent activist Julie Borst was one of many who opted their children out. She said, "Are you really going to rate my daughter's teachers, who spend an incredible amount of time, are really good at what they do, are making real tangible progress throughout the year, and you would dare base that on how my daughter would do on a standardized test like PARCC? That is insane" (Johnson, 2015).



Colorado students Ruthie and Hannah lobbying Representative Angela Williams. Photo by Ilana Spiegel.

- A widespread PARCC test opt-out campaign in **Colorado** was so successful that most large districts did not meet the NCLB 95% participation rate. ([Chalkbeat Colorado reported that only five large districts reached that threshold.](#)) Most of the refusals were of high school exams. Overall, it was a huge change from 2014, when there had been 99% participation in spring

testing on the former test, the paper-and-pencil TCAP. In Boulder Valley, with 30,908 students, just 35% of seniors took the English language arts test in the spring. In Littleton, with 15,691 students, only 29% of 11th graders took the May exams. In Colorado Springs, just 29 of 320 11th graders at Cheyenne Mountain High School took the spring PARCC tests. St. Vrain Superintendent Bob Haddad predicted that protests would continue until there is real change. "I don't think you're going to get parents and students back at the table ... because there's no trust" in the state testing system. "CMAS was summarily rejected by our students and parents." (The Colorado Measure of Academic Standards includes the PARCC tests.)

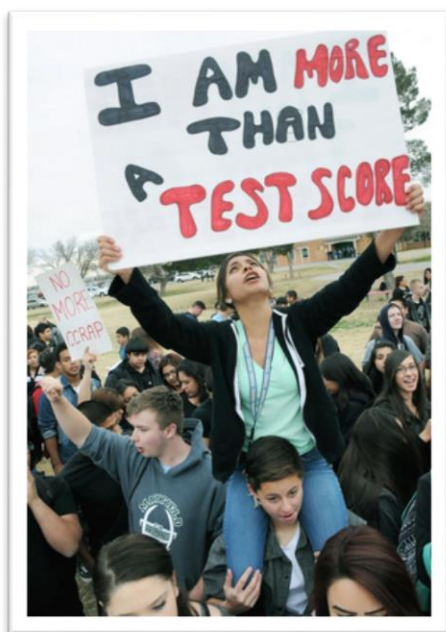
- In response to a Freedom of Information request, **Chicago** Public School officials announced preliminary figures in September 2015 showing at least 9,600 students opted out (Sanchez, 2015). (In 2014, there were an estimated 2,000 opt outs statewide, most in Chicago.) Parent activist Cassie Creswell said the figure was low, adding it is likely that there were close to or more than 5% opt outs in CPS (out of 200,000 third to ninth graders) and likely 10% in high school. (Illinois does not have a graduation exam.) The highest number of refusals was reported at Blaine Elementary, where 50% did not take the test. Principal Troy LaRaviere supported



Cassie Creswell estimated 10% of Chicago high school students opted out of testing. Photo by Marc Monaghan.

parents' right to opt out, resulting in disciplinary action from the CPS Chief Executive Officer. At some high schools, students took charge of the opt-out campaign. Kelly High School sophomore Aislinn Diaz distributed sample refusal letters. "I thought, why not? If the test is something that really doesn't matter that much and doesn't affect us in any way, why not learn more about it and see what we can do to stop it from happening," said Diaz. "I printed a bunch of copies and during lunch one day, I gave it to all my classmates" (Sanchez, 2015).

- **Oregon** barely met the statewide federal participation target of 95%. Twenty-one Oregon districts did not reach the target, including Portland, Eugene and Lake Oswego schools. Participation rates were also low in some rural areas. The state fell short of the target for black students and students in special education.
- Half the high school students in **Washington** state [refused](#) to take the grade 11 English and math Common Core tests, though students did take other tests required for graduation. Statewide, 1,500 to 3,000 [opted out](#) of each test in grades 3-8, totaling more than 11,000 per subject.
- **New Mexico** saw high numbers, with at least 3,000 in Albuquerque (Springer, 2015). Opt-outs tripled in **Pennsylvania**, with high opt-out numbers in several **California** and **Maine** districts.



New Mexico students walk out to protest PARCC exams in Las Cruces, N.M. Photo by Robin Zielinski, AP/Las Cruces Sun-News.

- While white, middle class parents are still more likely to opt their children out of testing, the movement includes growing numbers of parent and students of color, including in **New York, Chicago**, and throughout **New Mexico**. Seattle teacher, author and organizer Jesse Hagopian says it's absurd to say that there is no involvement by students and parents of color. "The revolt in communities of color against this high-stakes testing is growing and growing. You had one of the largest walk-outs in U.S. history against high-stakes testing in New Mexico this last year, in a school system that serves some 90 percent Latino students, who led organized marches out of their high school with signs that said 'We're more than a score' and refusing to take the new common core high-stakes tests" (Jackson, 2015).

- The high-profile national opt-out movement created a ripple effect in state legislatures, with many proposals to protect the rights of families who refuse testing for their children. Bills were filed to protect parents' right to opt out in **New Jersey, Wisconsin, Oregon, Maine, Arizona, Colorado, Alaska, Rhode Island, North Dakota, Massachusetts, New Hampshire** and **Delaware**. An Oregon law allowing opting out and requiring districts to notify parents of their rights goes into effect in January 2016. An opt-out bill received overwhelming support in the New Jersey House but was blocked by Senate leaders. Instead, a nonbinding resolution was passed. Similar legislation was vetoed by governors in Delaware, Maine and New Hampshire. Arizona's bill died in the Senate. Other bills remain in committee, such as in Massachusetts.
- Teachers unions in a number of states have announced their support for parents' right to opt out of testing including in **Massachusetts, Oregon, Rhode Island, Illinois, Florida** and **Rhode Island. New York** State United Teachers President Karen Magee went a step further and urged parents to keep their children out of state tests. "We are encouraging parents to opt out," Magee said on her radio show, adding, "We will be taking further steps to make parents aware of this" (Karlin, 2015).
- Both U.S. Senate and House bills to reauthorize ESEA contain provisions allowing opt outs.



Students walked out over testing in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois. Photo by Radianc Campbell.

V. PUBLIC OPINION MOVES STRONGLY TOWARD LESS TESTING, MORE LEARNING

Recent surveys confirm that opposition to testing overkill has moved into the mainstream.

- The 2015 *Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup Poll* (2015) shows Americans strongly oppose rating students, teachers and schools based on standardized exam scores. Nearly two-thirds (64%) think children are subjected to too many standardized tests. This includes



Opinion is shifting in urban and rural communities across the country. Photo by Woodson Maher.

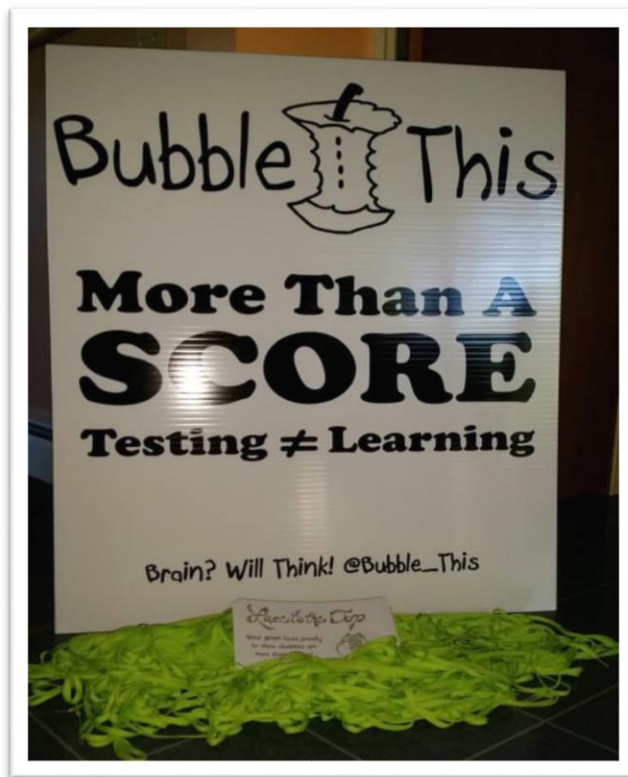
strong majorities from all major demographic groups (Black, Hispanic and White) as well as political affiliations (Republican, Democrat and Independent). When asked what they thought were the most accurate measures of school effectiveness, testing was ranked last. A majority, 63%, said they oppose including student standardized test scores as part of teacher evaluations, up from 47% in 2012. And a

plurality of public school parents (47%) support allowing students to opt out from standardized tests.

- A national poll conducted by **Rasmussen** in February found 60% of respondents said there is too much emphasis on standardized testing in schools. As a result of so much testing, said 69%, there is too much teaching to the test (Rasmussen, 2015a).
- A September **Rasmussen** poll found 58% of American adults *do not believe* that SAT results are an accurate reflection of a student's knowledge and intelligence (Rasmussen, 2015b).
- Two **New Jersey** polls (NJEA, 2015) surveyed a total of 400 parents and found large majorities held strong, negative views of standardized testing: 81% said they were concerned that "teachers are forced to teach to the test"; 80% said "too much of the

school year is spent preparing for standardized tests”; 78% want to cut the number of hours spent on testing; 78% said testing “causes stress for students”; and 77% said testing “takes time and money from other educational priorities.”

- A poll of 600 **Colorado** voters (Wetzel, 2014) revealed similar concerns about testing. Asked if Colorado students take too many tests, 63% said yes. And 83% agreed that there should be a limit on testing time (less than 20% of a teacher’s time should be spent preparing for and giving tests). The poll found that 86% of respondents thought that tests were either not effective or only somewhat effective in assessing student academic progress.



Signs of resistance to overtesting could be seen throughout New York State. Photo and logo by Kathryn D. Brown.

- As the U.S. Congress debated the reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (a.k.a. “No Child Left Behind”), a national poll by **HuffPost/YouGov** found more than half of Americans (56%) think states should have more power than the federal government over how standardized tests are used in schools. Just 21% thought the feds should have more power (HuffPost/YouGov, 2015).

VI. TEST-OPTIONAL COLLEGE ADMISSIONS MOVEMENT SURGES

This has been the best year in history for the movement away from reliance on standardized exam scores in undergraduate admissions. Since fall, 2014, a record three dozen colleges and universities reduced or eliminated ACT/SAT testing requirements, bringing the total of test-optional and test-flexible schools to more than 850.



George Washington University joins a long list of highly selective, test-optional schools.

- **George Washington University** announced in July 2015 that it would no longer require most applicants to submit ACT or SAT test scores. “Although we have long employed a holistic application review process, we had concerns that students who could be successful at GW felt discouraged from applying if their scores were not as strong as their high school performance,” said Dean of Admissions Karen Stroud Felton.

“We want outstanding students from all over the world and from all different backgrounds – regardless of their standardized scores – to recognize GW as a place where they can thrive.”

- George Washington joined a list of highly selective, test-optional schools that now includes American, Bates, Bowdoin, Brandeis, Bryn Mawr, Clark, Denison, Franklin and Marshall, Holy Cross, Mount Holyoke, Pitzer, Rollins, Sewanee, Smith, Union, Wesleyan, and Worcester Polytechnic.
- Other schools eliminating ACT/SAT requirements for many or all applicants in the past year include Allegheny, Cornell College, Drake, Kalamazoo, Sienna, The Catholic University of America, Transylvania, and Western New England.
- A growing number of public universities, such as Eastern Connecticut, Monmouth State, Old Dominion, Plymouth State, Rowan, Salem State, Temple, and Virginia Commonwealth, also eliminated ACT or SAT score requirements for all or many applicants.
- FairTest’s list of ACT/SAT-optional schools (at <http://www.fairtest.org/university/optional>) exceeds 850 and now includes more than 198 schools ranked in the top tiers of their respective categories. Nearly half of all top-ranked national liberal arts colleges have test-optional policies.

VII. FIRST STEPS TOWARD BETTER ASSESSMENT & ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

The ultimate goal of assessment reformers is not just fewer standardized exams and lower stakes from test results. Rather, it is more rich, varied, engaging and powerful learning for every student. Several states, including California and New Hampshire, are taking the first important steps toward developing more comprehensive and authentic assessment and accountability systems that will promote and measure this kind of school and learning.

- **New Hampshire** has launched a pilot program called the Performance Assessment of Competency Education, or PACE, in a small number of self-selected districts. The goal of PACE is to reduce standardized testing to only three grades while implementing locally developed common performance assessments. After several years of planning and initial implementation, the pilot was granted a waiver from NCLB by the U.S. Department of Education in March 2015. Participating teachers, state leaders and assessment experts came together in August to discuss the initial results. Jennifer Deenik, an award-winning high school biology teacher, was trained to develop common performance assessments and work with other teachers on implementing them. She described what makes the PACE assessment system so powerful, in comparison to a test-based system: “When I think of a child’s life in school between grade 3 and 12 and how much time is spent testing, and how little of that investment pays off in directly helping them become better learners, I see performance assessment as a way for students to gain back some precious learning time. When students work on a performance assessment, the learning doesn’t stop. They are learning *through* the task. Assessment shouldn’t stop the learning process; it should be part of it” (Poon, 2015).
- **California’s** nascent alternative local accountability system⁴ includes test results but moves away from making them the centerpiece (Fensterwald, 2015). Using the analogy of a car dashboard, the system is beginning to gauge a [range of indicators](#) of school quality, eight in all, including parent and student engagement, conditions of learning, and student outcomes. The metrics used to measure engagement could include absenteeism, suspension and graduation rates. Learning conditions would be indicated by the distribution of qualified teaching staff. Student outcomes still rely heavily on standardized test scores, from state exams to success in Advanced Placement courses, but also

⁴ For more details on California’s system, see the second section of this report, beginning on page 10: <http://www.lao.ca.gov/reports/2013/edu/lcff/lcff-072913.pdf>

include such things as progress towards English language proficiency. State education officials have said one goal of the new system is to shift the focus away from punishment for low test scores and toward school improvement.



Students at one of the NY Performance Standards Consortium member schools. Photo by Roy Reid.

- Meanwhile, an existing model of alternative assessment use has grown to include more schools and students. [The New York Performance Standards Consortium \(NYPSC\)](#) (2012) has expanded from 26 New York high schools to 38. These schools use performance assessments to achieve outstanding

outcomes in terms of high school graduation, college attendance and persistence, with high achievement for students with disabilities and English language learners.

VIII. GRASSROOTS PRESSURE MUST CONTINUE TO BUILD MOMENTUM FOR CHANGE

The assessment reform movement's rapidly expanding list of accomplishments is energizing ever-growing legions of parents, students and educators. Even establishment pundits are predicting concrete gains at the state level as a result of the burgeoning opt-out movement. A survey of education policy insiders found that "70 percent say they think the thousands of students



Students at the Urban Academy, part of the NYPSC, debate in a class called "Looking for an Argument?" Photo by Emma Sokoloff-Rubin.

refusing to take exams will force states to rethink what tests they give and how they use the results of those tests to judge students, educators and schools" (Felton, 2015).

Clearly, though, it is far too soon to declare victory and go home. Grassroots activists are analyzing the past several years for lessons that can be used to make the coming year's actions much more strategic, inclusive and effective. In 2015, many more

high school students refused state exams, particularly ones they did not have to pass for graduation. This is a welcome sign of greater student activism in resisting the tests. The number of states with significant opt-out activism also grew significantly and is likely to further expand to still more states as "tougher" tests and continuing sanctions wreak havoc on American schools.

The testing resistance movement is increasingly diverse, with the participation of more families of color in New York and Latino students in New Mexico, for example. In our increasingly stratified society, [building a truly inclusive movement](#) by bridging socioeconomic, racial and political divides will make it possible to overcome the efforts of testing proponents to divide and conquer. A diverse movement means we will be better able to expand the resistance, hold political leaders of every stripe to their promises, and continue to press for more substantive change.

The ultimate goal is much larger than just lower stakes, less testing and more learning. It is a democratic transformation of public education from a system driven by the narrow aims of standardized testing to one with the broad educational needs and goals of our diverse students at its heart. Parents, students, teachers and their allies made vital strides toward the goal in 2015.

REFERENCES

Council of Chief State School Officers. 2015. "Comprehensive Statewide Assessment Systems: A Framework for the Role of the State Education Agency in Improving Quality and Reducing Burden."

http://www.ccsso.org/News_and_Events/Press_Releases/CCSSO_Releases_Framework_to_Ensure_High-Quality_Assessments_.html

Deutermann, J. 2015. "When You Refuse." YouTube Video.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQUp0YISp6k>

Felton, E. 2015. "Experts predict the opt-out movement will get some of what it wants," *The Hechinger Report*. <http://hechingerreport.org/experts-predict-the-opt-out-movement-will-get-some-of-what-it-wants/>

Fensterwald, J. 2015. "Test scores to be only one factor in measuring school progress," *EdSource*. <http://edsources.org/2015/new-school-accountability-system-will-de-emphasize-smarter-balanced/86317>

Fox, J. 2015. "Boston superintendent wants less testing, broader assessments," *The Boston Globe*.

<http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2015/09/23/superintendent-chang-calls-for-less-testing-broader-assessments/PvA9hjs7iq2WV8ILEOquNI/story.html>

Harris, E. 2015. "New York Will Trim Common Core Exams after Many Students Skipped Them," *New York Times*. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/17/nyregion/new-york-will-trim-common-core-exams-after-many-students-skipped-them.html?_r=0

Hout, M. and Elliott, S.W. Editors. 2011. *Incentives and Test-Based Accountability in Education* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press), 30, http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12521.

HuffPost/YouGov, 2015. <http://big.assets.huffingtonpost.com/tabsHPNoChildLeftBehind20150803.pdf>

Jackson, J. 2015. "They're Robbing Kids of Critical Thinking," *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting*.

<http://fair.org/home/theyre-robbing-kids-of-critical-thinking/>

Johnson, A. 2015. "Thousands of Students in New Jersey Opt Out of Controversial PAARC Tests," WABC-TV.

<http://abc7ny.com/education/thousands-of-students-in-nj-opt-out-of-controversial-paarc-tests/540697/>

Karlin, R. 2015. "Going on the offense, NYSUT's Magee calls for test boycott," *Times Union*,

<http://blog.timesunion.com/capitol/archives/231494/going-on-the-offense-nysuts-magee-calls-for-test-boycott/>

Lazar, C. 2015. "Lee school's [sic] superintendent slashes testing hours," *Wink News*.

<http://www.winknews.com/2015/09/22/lee-schools-superintendent-slashed-testing-hours/>

Le Coz, E. 2015. "Mississippi ends testing requirement for diploma," *The Clarion Ledger*.

<http://www.clarionledger.com/story/news/2015/03/20/miss-ends-testing-requirement-diploma/25082065/>

New Jersey Education Association, 2015. "Attitudes of Parents and the Public Towards High-Stakes Standardized Testing in New Jersey." http://www.njea.org/njea-media/pdf/Webinar_PPT.pdf

New York Performance Standards Consortium. 2012. *Educating for the 21st Century*.

http://performanceassessment.org/articles/DataReport_NY_PSC.pdf

New York State Allies for Public Education. 2015. <http://www.nysape.org/nysape-press-release-cuomo-task-force-response.html#sthash.V33TDJyh.dpuf>

- PDK International. 2015. PDK/Gallup Poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools. <http://pdkpoll2015.pdkintl.org/>
- Poon, J. 2015. "A Peek Inside New Hampshire's Performance Assessment Pilot," Education Week. http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/learning_deeply/2015/09/a_peek_inside_new_hampshires_performance_assessment_pilot.html
- Rasmussen, 2015a. "Parents Give Standardized Testing a Failing Grade." http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/lifestyle/education/parents_give_standardized_testing_a_failing_grade
- Rasmussen, 2015b. "What do the SATs measure anyway?" http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/lifestyle/questions/september_2015/questions_sats_september_6_7_2015
- Sanchez, M. 2015. "Opt-out advocates want new stance from state," *Catalyst*. <http://catalyst-chicago.org/2015/09/opt-out-advocates-want-new-stance-from-state/>
- Springer, M. 2015. "PARCC opt out numbers for APS announced," KOAT. <http://www.koat.com/news/parcc-opt-out-numbers-for-aps-announced/32345118>
- St. George, D. 2015. "One of nation's largest school districts ditches high school final exams," *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/one-of-nations-largest-school-districts-ditches-high-school-final-exams/2015/09/08/49cf5810-561e-11e5-b8c9-944725fcd3b9_story.html
- TAMSA. 2015. Exit Exam State Comparison. http://www.tamsatx.org/uploads/3/1/6/2/3162377/exit_exam_state_comparison_2014-15_update-3.pdf
- Wetzel, M. 2014. "New voter education poll yields instructive lessons for policymakers," Colorado Education Association. <https://www.coloradoea.org/resources/association-news/2014/10/20/new-voter-education-poll-yields-instructive-lessons-for-policymakers>
- Zinth, J. 2015. Education Commission of the States. Email exchange on Sept. 30, 2015.