

Thousands likely to sit out New York English, math tests

April 13 2015, by Carolyn Thompson

Parent leaders of the movement to boycott New York's standardized tests say opting children out could do more for their education than the tests themselves.

As English assessments are given Tuesday through Thursday to more than 1 million third- through eighth-grade students, tens of thousands of others are expected, with their parents' permission, to refuse to take them with the hope of eventually changing state policy.

Parent critics and teachers unions say the tests and time spent preparing for them take away from creative instruction and that tying results to annual teacher and school rankings has only worsened the problem.

"The connection between these tests and the teacher evaluations and the school evaluations has changed the entire culture of what our kids are experiencing in school," said parent Eric Mihelbergel, whose fourth- and seventh-grade daughters will sit out the tests in the Kenmore-Tonawanda school district outside Buffalo. "Instead of the focus being on the student in school, now the focus is on the test."

Last year, about 49,000 students did not take the ELA test and about 67,000 sat out the math tests, according to the state Education Department. About 1.1 million students took each test. This year's math tests are scheduled for next week.

Mihelbergel, a member of New York Allies for Public Education, said

Monday the group's goal this year is 250,000 opt-outs, or enough to dilute their usefulness in teacher evaluations. State tests count for between 20 and 40 percent of a teacher's mandatory Annual Professional Performance Review under the current statewide formula.

But authorities warn there may be financial implications, as well. Federal law requires states to assess students in grades 3-8 each year and mandates that 95 percent of students in each school participate or risk losing federal funding, the New York State School Boards Association advised districts in a recent legal memo.

Although there were districts that fell short of the threshold last year, none have been sanctioned, state officials said.

"Any sanctions must be decided on a case by case basis, taking into account the degree and length of time the district has failed to meet participation rate requirements and the reasons for such failure," the Education Department said in an email.

Merryl Tisch, chancellor of the policy-setting Board of Regents, has said the assessments provide objective information about student progress and help identify students who need extra resources, particularly minority and special education students.

"Opting out could cost us much of the progress we have made, and damage the work that still needs to be done for our most vulnerable students," Tisch said after the head of the state's largest teachers union endorsed the opt-out movement. New York State United Teachers President Karen Magee's comments followed a contentious budget battle during which Gov. Andrew Cuomo had proposed doubling the weight of [test](#) results in teacher evaluations as part of a series of education reforms.

Mihelbergel said parents aren't opposed to the idea of assessments, but the current system—in which results are issued after the [school](#) year has ended and without showing what questions students got wrong—are of no use to parents or students. His daughters will spend the testing time reading, he said.

While state statute offers no guidance on how districts should handle opt-outs, several districts have said they will allow students to read quietly at their desks or go to a different room after being criticized for "sit-and-stare" policies that tied [students](#) to their desks with nothing to do.

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