

How Would Test Opt-out Impact Accountability Measures?

Evidence from the
CORE Districts and the
PACE/USC Rossier Poll

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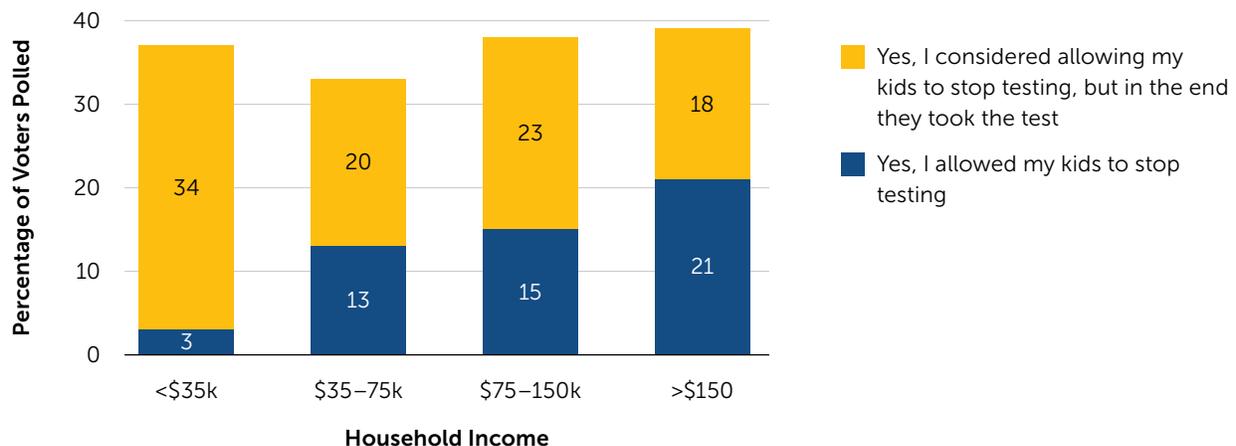
The number of students opting out of standardized tests has grown in recent years. This phenomenon poses a potential threat to our ability to accurately measure student achievement in schools and districts. This brief documents the extent to which opting out is observed in the CORE districts and models how higher opt-out levels could affect various accountability measures. More students opting out could significantly impact some accountability measures in use in California, but the CORE districts' growth measure is largely unaffected, as it reports the impact of schools on individual students' achievement. In contrast, accountability metrics that track student achievement by cohort are at risk of becoming biased even with relatively low absolute levels of opting out. This brief suggests that districts should consider explicitly adjusting for the characteristics of the students who actually sit for tests when designing school accountability systems.

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How Common is Opting Out?

According to a recent U.S. Department of Education report, more than one quarter of states missed the 95 percent student participation requirement for standardized testing in the 2014-15 school year, in part due to the growth in opting out. Rates of opting out range from lows of two percent and three percent in Idaho and California, to highs of 11 percent and 21 percent in Colorado and New York, respectively¹. However, even in states and districts with low average opt-out rates, student non-participation in testing can still present challenges when it is clustered within particular classrooms, schools, or districts. Furthermore, increases in test opt-outs could destabilize accountability metrics in the future. Recent data from the PACE/USC Rossier poll² confirms that there is still a substantial base of support for opting out in California, with 46 percent of respondents with children in public schools supporting or strongly supporting the right to opt out of standardized tests. While most of those who support it do not actually opt their children out, 14 percent of parents of school-aged students say that they have allowed their students to skip statewide standardized tests, and another 21 percent saying that they have considered it. As can be seen in Figure 1, the practice of opting-out varies substantially by income, with reported opt-out rates ranging from three percent for households making less than \$35,000 per year to 21 percent for households with annual income above \$150,000.

Figure 1. Opt-out practices and intentions of California parents with children in school, by income



To explore the possible impact of test opt-outs, I use data from the CORE districts, which together represent nearly 20 percent of the students served in California³. The data in these districts present an opportunity to explore how various scenarios of opting out could affect accountability measures throughout the state⁴. Across participating CORE districts, opt-out rates are low, with less than one percent of parents having signed a waiver to excuse their student from testing (my proxy for opting out); however, some CORE schools show

reported opt-out rates above ten percent despite the low average non-participation rate, and the results of the PACE/USC Rossier poll suggest this could grow over time.

How Can Opting Out Impact Accountability Systems in Education?

Students' failure to take standardized assessments can impact school districts by biasing results of accountability systems intended to assess student achievement. Most state accountability systems compute average student proficiency or growth based on standardized test scores, and then use these metrics as a measure of school quality. In California, student test results from the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), the state's standardized testing regime currently used in school accountability metrics, may become unrepresentative of their schools and districts if a large enough proportion of students choose not to be tested. The CORE districts use a broad range of metrics to track student and school performance. Although these performance indicators include multiple performance measures that rely on standardized test score results, they also focus on non-academic measures of student success, which provides an opportunity to understand how sensitive these measures are to test participation.

Who Opts Out of Tests and Why?

Students who opt out of testing tend to come from districts and demographic groups associated with higher levels of performance. White students, students from middle- and high-income families, and students proficient in English are more likely to opt out of testing, both nationally and within the CORE districts. Parents and students are driven by a range of beliefs leading them to opt out of standardized tests. These include the belief that education reform has come to focus too strongly on standardized tests, as well as some opposition to implementation of the common core standards across the nation. It is also important to note that support for opting out among parents is far higher than the current levels of opting out. National survey data show that 44 percent of White, 35 percent of Latinx, and 28 percent of African American respondents support the right to opt out of testing, with nearly 30 percent of all parents expressing a desire to opt their own students out of testing, far above current levels. This reported interest, along with data from the PACE/USC Rossier poll, indicates that many more parents may soon chose to opt out than currently do.

The demographics of students that opt out in the CORE districts mirror those seen nationally. To identify the students most and least likely to opt out, a comparison of student demographics was completed. Students that opt out in the CORE districts are more likely to be White, less likely to be Latinx or English Language Learners (ELL), and less likely to qualify for free or reduced price lunches⁵. To further uncover the factors that predict opting out, I ran a multivariate logistic regression predicting whether a student

opted out, which showed that Asian, African American, Latinx, and Pacific Islander students are all significantly less likely to opt out than White students.

What is the Impact of Students Opting Out on Measures of School Performance?

After identifying the characteristics of students opting out in the included CORE districts, this analysis then estimates the expected impact on a range of academic components. Using CORE’s measurement system for these academic components, along with the current opt-out demographics within CORE, Table 1 shows the estimated performance under a range of scenarios from zero to 20 percent average opt-out rates, based on each student’s predicted likelihood of opting out. In this way, we are able to estimate each school’s likelihood of being impacted by student opt-out based on the demographics of the students that they serve. In general, as opting out increases, school performance (but not growth) indicators decrease, making it look like performance is decreasing overall. For example, looking at the first row in Table 1, in CORE’s performance metric, schools are placed into 10 levels based on predetermined cut points. At a zero opt-out rate, the average school performance rating is 5.9. As opt-out levels increase, the average school performance rating decreases substantially, falling to an average rating of 5.4 at an estimated opt-out rate of 20 percent.

Table 1: Simulated school performance ratings based on various opt-out growth scenarios based on current demographics

SQII Academic Components	Estimated Performance Based on Opt-Out Rates of ...				
	0%	5%	10%	15%	20%
Performance Index					
Math Performance Index Level (1–10)	5.9	5.7	5.6	5.5	5.4
ELA Performance Index Level (1–10)	4.8	4.6	4.4	4.3	4.2
Growth Index					
Math Growth Index (1–10)	5.3	5.4	5.3	5.2	5.2
ELA Growth Index (1–10)	4.7	4.7	4.6	4.8	4.7
On Track to Graduate					
Chronic Absenteeism	5.6%	5.6%	5.6%	5.6%	5.6%
Proficiency Rate					
% Proficient in Math	48%	46%	45%	45%	43%
% Proficient in ELA	42%	41%	39%	39%	38%

In contrast, we see in rows 3 and 4 of Table 1 that the growth-index measures used by CORE do not appear to be systematically affected by increasing opt-out rates, likely due to the fact that this index explicitly models many of the same student characteristics associated with differential opt-out rates. Specifically, the CORE growth model takes into account an individual student's prior test scores, socioeconomic disadvantage, disability status, English learner status, homelessness, and foster care status, which are all dimensions related to variation in opting out as well. The growth model estimates the school impact on student achievement, taking into account how much each student grows from year-to-year. In this way, a growth model controls for any changes in the population of students being tested, whether the changes are a result of test opt-out or other demographic shifts within schools. This is in contrast to, for example, the California academic one-year performance change metric, which does not account for student characteristics and is therefore subject to bias introduced through differential opt-out growth rates. Other measures, such as chronic absenteeism, are not affected by opting out as they do not include test score data, while unadjusted proficiency rates may fall up to five percent due solely to increases in opting out (see rows 7 and 8 in Table 1).

What Can We Do to Prevent Future Growth in Opting Out from Impacting Accountability Measures?

The fact that CORE's growth indicator (which controls for prior test score, socioeconomic disadvantage, disability status, English learner status, homelessness, and foster care status) is largely unaffected by even a substantial increase in opting out has broader implications for the ideal construction of accountability systems. By explicitly accounting for the types of students sitting for tests, accountability systems can control to a large extent for the bias introduced through growth in student opt outs. However, the ability to adjust for large proportions of students opting out of testing has limits as a sufficient number of students still need to sit for tests to plausibly reflect the performance of their district. Another limitation is that the act of adjusting results based on expected performance implicitly lowers the bar for different groups of students. In other words, the trading of growth models for proficiency models is not a value-neutral proposition, and it will not necessarily reflect the values of those tasked with creating accountability systems in education. At a minimum, those tasked with tracking school and district achievement using student test performance should take into account the extent to which the tested students reflect the enrolled student population, and to the extent that they do not, be explicit about the manner in which they account for this difference.

Endnotes

- ¹ Klein, A. (2015, Dec. 22). Ed. dept. to states: Even under ESSA, you need a plan for high opt-out rates, *Education Week*, http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/campaign-k-12/2015/12/ed_dept_to_states_under_essa_need_plan_for_opt-Outs.html.
- ² <https://edpolicyinca.org/polls>
- ³ Detail on the sample and the full analysis can be found in the working paper that this brief is based on, which can be found at: <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/how-would-test-opt-out-impact-accountability>
- ⁴ This analysis includes 315,355 student records across the included districts.
- ⁵ See analysis in full working paper: <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/how-would-test-opt-out-impact-accountability>

Author Biography

Edward Cremata is the Director of Research and Analytics at Aspire Public Schools. Prior to this role he spent six years as a researcher and econometrician at Stanford University. He has conducted research on a broad range of topics including statistical methods of causal inference, school and teacher accountability systems, school choice, and school turnarounds. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Southern California.

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Related Publications

Polikoff, M. S. ***On growth models, time for California to show some improvement.*** (2019). Policy brief. Palo Alto: Policy Analysis for California Education.

Polikoff, M. S., Hough, H., Marsh, J. A., & Plank, D. N. (2019) ***Californians and public education: Views from the 2019 PACE/USC Rossier Poll.*** Palo Alto: Policy Analysis for California Education.

Phillips, M., Reber, S., & Rothstein, J. (2018). ***Making California data more useful for educational improvement.*** Palo Alto: Getting Down to Facts II, Policy Analysis for California Education and Stanford University.

Polikoff, M. S. (2019). ***Gauging the revised California School Dashboard.*** Palo Alto: Policy Analysis for California Education.



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