

# The Testing Resistance and Reform Movement: A FairTest Report

Executive Summary

By Monty Neill, with Lisa Guisbond

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### **Executive Summary**

Across the nation, resistance to test overuse and misuse reached unprecedented heights in the spring of 2014. The rapidly growing movement built on significant test opposition <u>unleashed in 2013</u>. This year, resistance erupted in more states with far more participants, and it won <u>notable victories</u>.

To understand how parents, students, educators, community leaders and other allies built the movement, FairTest interviewed more than 30 activists, primarily parents, from across the nation. We also tracked news stories, read research reports and blogs, and talked with policymakers. Here is a summary of our findings, which are explained in more detail in the <u>full report</u>.

#### The Resistance Grows

In New York, 60,000 children and their parents refused to take federally mandated state tests in grades 3-8 – up from a few thousand in 2013. More than 1000 opted out in both Chicago and Colorado, as well as in smaller numbers in other regions. Teachers boycotted at two schools in Chicago and one in New York City, while high school students in several states walked out on tests.

Opt-outs and boycotts were two of many strategies used by resistance and reform campaigns. The Providence Student Union held creative demonstrations (dressing as guinea pigs, for example, to protest being used in testing experiments) and with allies launched effective legislative work that led to a moratorium on Rhode Island graduation exams. Baltimore teachers wore circus garb and demonstrated at street corners on testing days, holding signs telling officials to "stop clowning around with our kids' educations." Across the nation, assessment reformers organized public forums, community meetings and house parties that helped grow the movement. Activists made powerful use of social media – Twitter, Facebook, websites, listservs – to communicate internally, build a base and educate the community. In some places, petitions proved useful tools to inform the public, expand support and pressure public officials, while rallies brought people together in highly visible ways.

The growing resistance was reflected in expanded, often sympathetic mainstream media coverage, from major national papers to local news outlets. FairTest's weekly compilations of <u>significant stories</u> helped local activists see they were part of an expanding national movement. The media attention also began to influence policymakers.

Unions stepped up. The National Education Association (NEA) launched a national campaign against "toxic testing." The American Federation of Teachers and the NEA are leading the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS) which involves dozens of national, state and local organizations uniting across a range of issues, including testing.

Some state unions have taken strong steps. The Oklahoma Education Association allied with parent groups to soften grade 3 test-based promotion and helped defeat the pro-testing state education secretary. Oregon and Massachusetts NEA affiliates called for three-year moratoria on all testing consequences to allow time to overhaul state assessment systems. Both support the right of parents to opt out. The Massachusetts Teachers Association is holding testing forums with teachers across the state, and the Oregon Education Association is designing, with state officials, a possible new assessment system. The Chicago Teachers Union helped organize boycotts and opt outs. Parents reported that as they organized, local unions increasingly joined with them to resist the testing onslaught. In many cases parents did not think state unions were very helpful, but they would like to see state unions get involved.

School boards are also resisting test overkill. In Texas, 85% of districts passed a resolution condemning testing for "strangling" education. That set the stage for a 2013 parent-led legislative campaign that rolled back the number of graduation tests from 15 to 5. In New York, about 20 districts refused to administer tests used for the sole purpose of trying out items for the next year's state exams. Parents prodded the districts and provided legal backing. This fall, the Lee County, Florida, school board voted to opt out of all state-mandated standardized tests. Though it later retreated, that school board and others across the state, together with parent and teacher allies, are pursuing strategies to slash state test requirements, making it easier for districts to reduce their own testing mandates. Lee County's Board also voted to drop all district-required exams (districts often add many tests to state and federal requirements). Parent groups, anti-common core activists and progressive educators all contributed to this victory.

The first wave of tangible "wins" included many significant steps forward. In the past two years: seven states dropped, reduced or delayed graduation tests; four ended, softened or blocked proposals for grade retention tests; and many states implemented moratoria on the use of student tests to judge teachers and sometimes to judge schools. Moreover, candidates began winning elections on platforms calling for test reduction. (For details, see <u>Testing Reform Victories</u>: <u>The First Wave</u>). Even Education Secretary Arne Duncan acknowledged test proliferation is "sucking the oxygen" out of classrooms, though to date he has done nothing to alter the situation he helped cause. In many cases, the most important result of the spring actions has been a stronger movement that will keep growing.

### **Obstacles**

Activists often encountered hostile bureaucratic responses, which tended to be more harsh in lower-income schools and communities, particularly ones that are heavily black or Latino. Chicago authorities bullied parents into rescinding optout letters, then interrogated children without parents present when they refused to take the tests. School district officials threatened to fire teachers who boycotted but did not follow through.

Across the nation, some schools and districts forced children who refused the test to "sit and stare," to remain at their desks doing nothing, sometimes for hours. Parents forced many to back down. Initially, more than half the districts on Long Island, NY, used sit and stare, but parent and union activism pressured all but one into allowing students to read or engage in other learning activities. Some states, including North Carolina, encouraged such humane behavior, and when necessary, parents made sure districts responded properly. But news reports show that sit and state continued in some districts in New York and other states.

Graduation exam requirements are a strong deterrent to high-school opt-outs, because young adults need diplomas, but coalitions of students, parents, educators and civil rights groups have won victories using other tactics, as did the Rhode Island campaign. Similarly, parents whose children risk not being promoted to the next grade must negotiate the threat of test-based retention. In New York City, some middle schools use student test scores to admit students. Some have agreed to halt this test misuse, while pressure continues on others. Ending that requirement makes it easier for parents to opt out.

A year ago, it seemed leaders and parents in many locales were disproportionately white and middle class, though students of color often took the lead in cities and there were active parents of color. This racial imbalance has begun to change. A New York City alliance found that parents and students named testing as the second biggest education problem, after funding. Parents of color stepped forward in leadership roles. These parents participated in boycotts as well as community meetings, house parties and other actions in growing numbers. Other locales continue to report the movement includes relatively fewer lower income/working class parents or parents of color.

Part of the problem is fear of sanctions. Parents and educators are led to believe that their schools will face punishment or lose funding if many students opt out, particularly in schools that receive federal Title I funds, though such claims are mostly <u>not true</u>. Finally, the belief that test-based accountability will help persists in some areas. Parent activists across the country report that this perception is changing, however, as parents in general increasingly see the destructive consequences of test mania.

Finally, in what is both an opportunity and a challenge, the testing resistance and reform movement pulls in parents and community members coming from widely varying political perspectives, from Tea Party to Bad Ass Teachers and United Opt Out. These groups share opposition to test misuse and overuse, but must negotiate

how to prevent differences on other issues from undermining assessment reform campaigns. In some places, alliances that cut across normal political lines are functioning well. In others, groups are working in parallel, at times uneasily.

### What next?

The assessment reform movement needs to expand. At the same time it must focus its momentum to win more tangible victories. The ultimate goal remains dramatically reducing the amount of testing, ending high stakes uses, and overhauling assessment systems. While progress has been made, much more must be done. Several bills in the U.S. House would <u>cut back NCLB-mandated testing</u>. More states could drop graduation tests. Grade promotion exams need to be challenged. Some districts are reducing the number of required tests, though many test most grades a dozen or more times a year. Parents across the country are also pushing for laws protecting the right to opt their children out of tests, as California law already allows.

Activists know assessment is valuable for teaching and learning. Limited use of no-stakes standardized exams could be acceptable as one part of a comprehensive system. But tests alone are too narrow and provide too little information about the full range of student learning and school performance that parents and the public need. There are better ways to assess and evaluate schools, educators and children. To move beyond testing overkill, activists will have to win major changes in federal and state law as well as local policy. FairTest has called for an indefinite moratorium on accountability testing to allow time to develop new assessments that build from the classroom out.

Those wins will not happen without a greatly expanded movement. Local groups are developing strategies and implementing plans for the 2014-2015 school year. Many have already launched fall actions such as forums, petitions, and school board resolutions. Having more office-holders who support the test reform movement will help. Some who are campaigning on test reform platforms will win office, but it is essential to persuade more politicians to alter their positions. Activists know that large numbers of opt outs can render testing data unusable as well as intensify pressure on politicians to act. Many people, however, cannot opt out, so organizers are developing more ways for people to become involved. These include school board resolutions and petitions, as well as rallies and community meetings.

FairTest is confident that the testing resistance and reform movement will expand in size, reach and power. The road will not be easy. Our allies face well-funded, deeply entrenched forces. Though test-and-punish proponents are engaged in tactical retreats in some jurisdictions – supporting brief suspensions of testing requirements, for example – they will doubtlessly try other strategies to control education through testing.

We cannot afford to relax the pressure on policy makers. By building larger, stronger, grassroots campaigns, assessment reformers will remain on track to win many more victories in the coming years.