Study gives failing grades to state testing

By Paul Brooks
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NEW PALTZ – A new Benjamin Center study raps New York’s standardized tests and lends support to the “opt-out” movement that has reached 40 percent and higher in the mid-Hudson.

The center, which is housed at SUNY New Paltz, released “Tests are Turning Our Kids into Zeros: A focus on failing” on Wednesday.

The “zeros” in the title refers to the zero scores young students got for their answers to questions on the English Language Arts tests. It was not that the students didn’t try to answer the questions; it was that scorers rated many of the kids’ answers as “totally inaccurate,” “unintelligible” or “indecipherable,” the study said.

Researches Fred Smith and Robin Jacobowitz say it is not the fault of the kids. The research results point to the tests – which cost millions of dollars to prepare - as the source of the problem, they say. The essay questions researchers focused on were too difficult and inappropriate for the kids who took the tests and the overall test development flawed, according to the researchers.

“We conclude that testing instruments that put children in a virtual stupor cannot be defended as sound testing practice, nor as a way to raise standards or serve as a foundation for high-stakes decisions and statistical models to evaluate teachers, rate principals or close schools.”

Smith and Jacobowitz looked at the test scores for students in grades 3 through 8 on the state’s standardized English Language Arts and math tests. They dug into the results of a total of 1.2 million students a year statewide from 2012 to 2016. They also analyzed more detailed data on 440,000 of those students from New York City. They focused the research on the extended written answers to the
open-ended English questions.

The time frame covers the state’s switchover in 2013 to new tests based on what is called the Common Core, a new way of approaching and measuring learning of English, math and other subjects. The Benjamin Center study says the percentages of third-graders who got zero scores skyrocketed in 2013 to 18 percent. In 2012, under the previous standards and tests, 11 percent of the third-graders got zeros on the ELA test. The percentage of zeros climbed to 21 percent in the next two years and then to 22 percent in 2016. The percentages also jumped in grades 4 through 8, though not as high.

The new tests had another impact, according to the study. The gap in the test scores between white students and Asian students and other groups widened. Students who were still learning English, those with disabilities, as well as black and Hispanic students all fell further behind white and Asian students on the newer tests, the study said.

The state Education Department disputed the assertions about high levels of zero scores. “In general, it would not imply a flaw in the test; rather, it would demonstrate students struggled to master the content being assessed,” according to a statement.

Some parents complained to the state that the tests took too much time to prepare students for, were too hard, ambiguous and stressed out students unnecessarily.

So, they refused to let their kids take the tests. They opted out, Smith and Jacobowitz said. In 2015, 20 percent of students opted out of taking the tests. In 2017, the most recent accounting available from the state, 19 percent rejected the tests.

In the mid-Hudson, with its 34 school districts, 63 percent of the students in New Paltz opted out and refused to take the tests. That was the highest percentage in 2017. But 37 percent of the kids in Eldred avoided the tests too. In Greenwood Lake, 53 percent of kids opted out.

“This study offers evidence to support the early test critics,” Smith said.

Bianca Tanis of New Paltz, a special education teacher, is one of those early
critics and an opt-out advocate.

"The tests have actually gotten worse," she said. State Education officials say they responded to the complaints by, among other things, cutting the number of days of testing this year from three to two. But, Tanis said, "Day two was the worst anybody has ever seen."

The state is still using the questions from Pearson, she said. Pearson is the firm which developed the test used in 2013, though the state hired a different firm, Questar, in 2016.

Regardless of that change, Tanis said, the state continues to use a score on the college SAT as the benchmark. "It is higher than the colleges ask for. It is a flawed standard," she said. "Nothing will change until that is changed."

The state Education Department said it plans no changes in the testing next year. In July 2017, it adopted what it calls Next Generation standards. Those will not be fully phased in and implemented until the spring of 2021.

Smith said parents should continue to opt out of taking the tests. "It is the only way out of the cycle."