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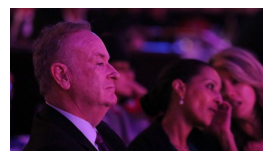
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## EDUCATION

# The Whitewashing Of The Opt-Out Movement

BY **CASEY QUINLAN** APR 11, 2016 9:10 AM

CREDIT: SHUTTERSTOCK

With standardized testing season in full force, the so-called “opt-out movement” remains strong. Parents who think testing is having a deleterious effect on their children’s education are once again opting their kids out of tests. But this year, activists are taking one of their biggest critiques head on — that the “opt-out movement” is too white and upper middle class.

This perception was elevated by former education secretary Arne Duncan, who [said in 2013](#) that he found it “fascinating” that the criticisms of testing were mostly coming from “white suburban moms” who are realizing their kid “isn’t as brilliant as they thought they were.”

Supporters of the opt-out movement, and others who simply thought Duncan was being flippant and dismissive of parent concerns, were outraged at his comments. Former principal and current Executive Director of the Network for Public Education Foundation Carol Burris wrote that Duncan must think suburban moms are a “[gullible bunch](#).”

That perception was already in the public’s mind when High Achievement New York [released a study](#) last year showing that most of the districts with high opt-out rates among elementary and middle schoolers were located in affluent Long Island neighborhoods. And the studies kept coming. A [PDK/Gallup poll](#) found that almost one in three African Americans said standardized tests were “very important” for comparing school districts and schools in other states compared to 15 percent of white people.

Given all of the reporting on the white supporters of the movement, a hashtag trended on Twitter: [#optoutsowhite](#).

But that doesn’t mean that plenty of people of color aren’t getting involved. There are prominent black and

Hispanic supporters of the opt-out movement doing work across the country to bring more awareness to the cause. In turn, the movement is doing more to reach out to parents of color and to make their roles more visible.

In New York, opt-out organizers are raising money for robocalls in English and Spanish, and trucks emblazoned with opt-out messages are driving through more than 100 school communities, PoliticoPro reported in its analysis of how the movement is changing its outreach strategy. Opt-Out Philly has also seen more participation from black families. During a conference held in the city, a black mother of four, Shakeda Gaines, told organizers that the movement “can’t be successful” without the participation of families in urban areas, whom she argued are suffering the most from standardized testing, according to same PoliticoPro story.



CREDIT: SHUTTERSTOCK/DYLAN PETROHILOS

## The voices of color in the opt-out movement

“I think, as with everything else in America, your white population is going to get the most attention,” said Ceresta Smith, a teacher at John A. Ferguson Senior High School and parent who opted her child out of standardized tests. Smith, a leader in the national opt-out movement through United Opt Out, has played a significant role in Miami’s strong opt-out movement for years. “It would behoove them to silence the voices of black and brown parents, to make it look like it’s only the white soccer moms who are engaged in this movement.”

Smith said there’s actually a “very strong presence” of organized African American parents opting their children out of testing, as well as parents of color in Miami, Seattle, Fort Lauderdale, New Jersey, and New

York, but that many people just don't realize it.

"I think the black and brown voices have been silenced," Smith said. "When it comes to their participation in this movement you see just a handful of the same faces, and they're predominantly white. When you look at the face of the movement, it's the Long Island moms — and unfortunately the Philly moms, the Jersey moms, the black women in Miami, and Fort Lauderdale, and in Seattle... you had a lot of African Americans involved but you don't see it. It's not visible. It's not publicized."

Smith first became involved in the movement herself when she was a reading coach at a sanctioned school. She said she saw standardized testing hurt teachers' academic freedom, and prevented them from preparing the best curricula for students.

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"It was just a whole step back to the '50s, because this was a predominantly black school and I couldn't believe how people were being treated and micromanaged. It was very detrimental and negative," Smith said. "Nothing that was going on would build true literacy for these kids. It was basically a test-prep school."

Ruth Rodriguez, who has spent most of her career in education, teaching kindergartners and working to foster good communication between parents and their schools, has been very involved in Massachusetts' opt-out movement and United Opt Out. She advised Gov. Deval Patrick's Readiness Project on MCAS and Assessment, and she's currently on the Advisory Board of Citizens for Public Schools in Boston. In the [spring of 2017](#), students will take a test that is a combination of the MCAS and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers tests (PARCC).

Rodriguez, a bilingual teacher who identifies as Latina, said her experiences as an educator have led her to believe the tests are particularly detrimental to Latino students.

"I was very interested in what was going on because the students come to Massachusetts in 9th grade with no English — and in 10th grade, they have to take the test and if they don't pass the test, they don't graduate," Rodriguez said, referring to the MCAS' competency determination [graduation requirement](#). "And that's very unfair. I said to Duval Patrick, 'I challenge you and anyone in this room to immerse yourself for one year in Spanish and then take the test in Spanish, because that is what you are asking English language learners to do.'"

She said attracting Latino parents to the cause has required more outreach for cultural reasons.

"The movement is very diverse, but the fact of the matter is that Latino and black families are faced with additional pressures from the system," Rodriguez said. "And Latino parents don't question the schools, and so they trust that the schools are doing the best they can to protect their children. And for Latinos to come out, they needed to have information made clear about what was happening."

## Civil rights and standardized testing

Much to the consternation of the opt-out movement, civil rights groups have largely supported standardized testing.

The National Urban League, NAACP, and the League of United Latin American Citizens, among other organizations, have made it clear that they supported the testing requirement in the Every Student Succeeds Act — which has now become law — although they also made it clear that English language learners and students with disabilities should be accommodated during tests.

About a dozen civil rights groups also signed a statement opposing the opt-out movement, arguing that testing data is the only “available, consistent, and objective source of data about disparities in educational outcomes, even while vigilance is always required to ensure tests are not misused.”

Rev. Al Sharpton shares that position. Earlier this month, he came out in favor of standardized testing aligned with Common Core state standards, saying that test results “show the gap between education in some areas and others.”

“Why are we seeing students in some areas more able in math and English and reading and not in other areas? We need to be able to measure that and we need to be real clear about the educational inequality,” Sharpton said at a rally, according to the New York Post.



CREDIT: AP/MARK LENNIHAN

Diane Ravitch, research professor of education at New York University, who also served as assistant

secretary of education and counselor to Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander from 1991 to 1993, has fired back at the statements of civil rights groups, saying the high-stakes tests themselves are hurting students' education, not the parents' choice to opt out of them.

United Opt Out activist Morna McDermott, an associate professor at Towson University, says the group plans to reach out to parents of color through on-the-ground outreach to local community organizations and their sister organizations as well as faith-based institutions. Smith said Opt Out United plans to change the national conversation civil rights groups are having through changes in the perspective of local chapters of those groups.

## Parents and teachers have valid concerns about testing

In the past year, there has been some consensus around the idea that the way standardized testing is currently set up in many schools is not working.

The Obama administration released guidelines on testing to ensure the tests are fair and effective and said no more than 2 percent of classroom time should be spent on tests.

Research out of SUNY New Paltz' Benjamin Center for Public Policy Initiatives has also shown that besides spending time on the test itself, a lot of time is being spent on pre-test and post-test tasks, such as setting up the classroom for a test and other administrative work. The report also found that the majority of teachers were less likely to introduce new academic material on testing days. A Center for American Progress report, released earlier this year, showed that parents receive little communication about what the test is for and how it will be used. Teachers can't communicate with parents either, because teachers also receive very little information.

Rodriguez said educators ultimately feel condescended to and distrusted.

"Good teachers are leaving the profession," she said. She said teachers say to themselves, "'I'm going to be teaching to a test that I have nothing to do with? That I don't even see? I don't even see where they need the help because I don't get the test back.'"

According to a 2015 Council of the Great City Schools study, 40 percent of the school districts it surveyed didn't provide test scores to teachers until the next school year. Given the Center for American Progress report's findings, it's not hard to see why teachers would be frustrated.

Teachers in many school districts end up spending instructional time specifically preparing students for the test, and teachers aren't being provided the support they need to ensure they understand how to design curricula that better align with tests. Instead, this "teaching to the test" approach may disrupt disadvantaged students' learning process more. Lower-income parents were twice as likely to say their child received test prep than the highest income parents who took part in the study, reflecting Smith's concerns that test prep is taking over schools in low-income neighborhoods that have predominantly black and Hispanic student population.

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*"There is a lot of unnecessary test prep and pressure put on students ..."*

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“The thing about some of the concerns with opt out is that there are a lot of real valid concerns about some of these tests,” said Scott Sargrad, managing director of the K-12 Education Policy team at the Center for American Progress. “Parents don’t really see value in the tests. There isn’t communication about them from their schools. Teachers don’t really understand them. There is a lot of unnecessary test prep and pressure put on students, so all of that is definitely driving some of this.”

However, despite a growing consensus between the opt-out movement and civil rights groups and nonprofits that there are major problems with standardized testing, there are major disagreements on what the solution is.

Of course, not every opt-out supporter will hold the same views on what exactly should be done to remedy their concerns about standardized testing. But the individuals who spoke to ThinkProgress — Smith, Rodriguez, and McDermott — consistently held the view that standardized testing itself is the problem, and that the answer is not improvements or tweaks, but the elimination of a system they say is fundamentally wrong for students.

“We know that poverty is an enormous part of the problem in education,” McDermott told ThinkProgress. “But yet we spend money testing children who we know are struggling to overcome factors above and beyond the ‘right’ curriculum or dedicated teachers. In medicine, once you know the diagnosis you stop testing to find the problem and focus on the solution. Yet we fail to follow this logic in education.”

Sargrad disagreed and says that although many schools are located in historically disadvantaged neighborhoods and have poor resources, the problem isn’t always identifiable through those factors, and suggested teacher bias toward students of color and teacher expectations, and a number of other reasons could contribute to gaps in test scores.

“What we didn’t know until we had data on this from these tests is that in some more middle class and affluent communities, there are still these huge achievement gaps between white students and students of color in schools that might seem like they’re doing well overall or seem like they have enough resources ... When you say we know where the struggling schools are, that’s certainly true in one sense, but there are a lot of schools that aren’t serving particular groups of kids well and that’s where we need some of these tests to show that,” Sargrad argued.

He also pointed out that Every Student Achieves Act should ameliorate some of these concerns.

“One of of the concerns is the pressure and the stakes on the tests and that they’re supposed to identify the schools as failing and if you didn’t meet a target on a test regardless of what else is going on, you’re a failing school, and now that’s totally different. I think there’s going to be way less pressure on these tests, the stakes are going to be lower, there is way more flexibility for states to figure out how much tests are going to matter in these accountability systems, and people aren’t feeling that yet because the law is so new,” he said.

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