

Article of the Week (AoW) Directions

1. Mark your confusion – either highlighting or underlining.
2. Mark up the text. Annotate the article with comments, questions, inferences, etc. You can use a variety of sentences, phrases, and symbols to show your thinking.
3. Write a developed paragraph response to one of the prompts below.

STATE TESTING SEES GROWING MOVEMENT OF FAMILIES PLANNING TO OPT OUT

Confusion abounds about what happens next for those refusing to take standardized exams

Source: John Mooney/www.njspotlight.com/April 21, 2014

It started with a trickle a few years ago, and it may still be only a small stream, but more and more New Jersey families appear intent on opting to have their children not take the state's standardized tests.

Nearly 700 people have signed onto a Facebook group called "Opt-Out of State Standardized Tests -- New Jersey," reflecting the mounting criticism to the increased reliance on standardized testing not just in New Jersey but nationwide.

Earlier this month, Newsday reported more than 5,500 Long Island students had opted out of New York State's tests, which have been particularly controversial.

And while the New Jersey protesters still represent just a tiny fraction of the number of students taking the tests, perhaps the clearest evidence of the growing opposition came in the last few weeks as the state Department of Education started advising school districts on how to deal with students opting out of the state's upcoming NJASK tests.

A department spokesman was mum about details of the recommendations made to school districts, maybe not wanting to encourage the practice of skipping the tests. And officials said there is no formal policy beyond an expectation that all students take the tests.

But superintendents in several counties said the education department's county offices have given them informal guidance about what to do if children and their parents play the civil disobedience card and refuse to take part in the upcoming testing in elementary and middle schools, including how to mark them down and what documents should be filed on their behalf.

The guidelines haven't necessarily been consistent across all counties or all districts, however, as parents have said some schools are taking a tougher stance than others on how to handle those who refuse to take the tests.

For instance, some schools say that children will still need to stay in the testing room while others are taking the exams. Others say they can go to the library or the school office.

Citing instructions from the state, North Arlington schools posted on their website that students refusing to take the tests "are considered disruptive and should be removed from the testing room."

“Some schools and districts have been really lovely and gentle with children,” said Sue Schutt, a Ridgewood mother and New York City school administrator who has been a leader in the movement. “Others have been a lot more aggressive, not knowing what they can do.”

“I don’t think they have gotten a whole lot of guidance on this,” she added.

In her case, Schutt said the district told her that if her children opted out of the test, they would be able to go to another room during the testing. Another option, she was told, would be to not to come to school that day and just be marked absent.

“We’re not going home,” Schutt said. “We will refuse to take the test, and stay at school.”

Michael Yapple, communications director for the state Department of Education, said the law makes it clear that schools must administer the tests. He said students are expected to participate, but he could not provide more detail about what will happen if they don’t.

“NJASK and HSPA (the high school test) are the statewide assessments that New Jersey gives to comply with the federal requirements under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), first established in 2002,” he said in an email. “As such, it is the Department’s expectation now -- as it has been since 2002 -- that students will participate in the testing programs.”

He added that schools are required under NCLB to show that 95 percent of their students have participated in the test.

Still, the state’s technical code for the assessments provides for students opting out of the tests, allowing them to be marked as having “refused” testing. In the state’s summary of the 2013 NJASK, the option is listed among those having a test marked as “Void.”

Another option is to have students take an absence from school on the testing and make-up days, with the state leaving it to districts to decide if they take it as an excused or unexcused absence. Typically, fewer than 2,000 of the estimated 600,000 students taking state tests are absent for one section or another, but that can be due to any number of reasons.

Schutt said she had no number on how many are joining the protests, only saying it has grown exponentially. She said that more than 30,000 students had refused to take the standardized tests in New York State. She hoped to do a survey once testing begins.

“When we started this, it was four families,” Schutt said. “Every year it has grown a little more, and this year it just exploded.”

The only downside is that as also administrator of the Facebook page, Schutt has been swamped with questions and requests for information.

“In the last few months, it has been double or triple the numbers joining,” she said. “I’m finding it difficult to answer all the questions. Let’s just say it’s keeping me quite busy.”

Respond to one of the following prompts. Use the back of this paper.

1. What do you think should be the consequence for students who opt out of testing?
2. Instead of testing, how can school track student achievement?
3. Choose a word, sentence, or passage and respond to it.