

Testing in the Education System: The Complexities of Standardization, High-Stakes Outcomes and the Opt-Out Movement

Praxis Project Thesis: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts - as part of the Community, Youth, and Education Studies Major at Clark University

Aidan Moffatt

Committee Signatures:



Eric DeMeulenaere, Ph. D.



Jude Fernando, Ph. D.



Sarah Cramer, MAT

ABSTRACT

There is widespread frustration over the negative impacts of standardized testing among students, parents, educators and educational researchers. Despite this frustration only a few places in the country have developed significant movements in which parents opt their children out of the mandated standardized tests. This study works to better understand this disconnection by engaging parents, teachers, and professionals in conversations about standardization in tests, high-stakes outcomes, and the formal opt-out process for exempting children from standardized testing. These conversations, which were administered as interviews, provided our research team with compelling, relevant data on the topics of testing and the opt-out movement. Following the analysis of participant data, we compiled select information to our website and social media platforms as a general resource for testing and opt-out knowledge. This study reveals how learning about the rather simple and legal ways of opting-out of the formal standardized testing system can shape students, parents/guardians, and educators' understanding about the necessity of participating in this testing system that many have determined to be detrimental to their own academic success.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract 2

1.	Introduction	4
	1.1. Vignette	4
2.	Review of Literature	7
	2.1. History	7
	2.2. Teacher Autonomy	9
	2.3. Cultural Capital	10
	2.4. Accountability/Performance Expectations	12
	2.5. Standardization in Tests	13
3.	Conceptual Framework	14
	3.1. Broad Framework	14
4.	Methods	15
	4.1. Methodological Stance	15
	4.2. Epistemological Stance	17
	4.3. Action Site	17
	4.4. Positionality	18
	4.5. Participants	19
	4.6. Data Collection	20
	4.7. Data Analysis	20
5.	Findings	21
	5.1 Inspirations and the Desire for Change in Education	21
6.	Educational Detriment and the Opt-Out Movement	23
	6.1. General State Standardization and Testing Culture	23
	6.1.1. State Standardization: Racial and Economic Biases	24
	6.1.2. General District Standardization	26
	6.2. The High Stakes Aspect of Testing	27
	6.3. Opt-Out Experience and Knowledge	30
7.	Conclusion	33
	7.1. Summary	33
	7.2. Theoretical Implications	35
	7.3. Implications for Practice	36
	7.4. Limitations	37
	7.5. Significance	38
8.	Works Cited	41

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Vignette

Most seniors struggle to find motivation during the last several weeks of high school. They are on the final stretch of a process which they have been working on for the last decade and a half of their lives. During this period, final grades are coming to a close, AP tests have been completed, senior projects have been presented, college acceptances have been announced, and non college-bound students are preparing to enter the world of work.

For me, this should have been a time for reflection, gratitude, and preparation for the next steps in life. However, at this point in my senior year, it felt like the teachers were pushing me to continue working as intensely as I had been since the beginning of the year for no real reason other than to keep me busy. This belief, combined with my waning motivation led to conflict at this time.

My final math class in high school was Algebra II. With just a few weeks remaining, the teacher had announced that the class would be taking the final online district assessment for our grade level, a test that seemed ridiculous to us all. In previous assessments of this type, the teachers had been very strict with the fact that our final score would be entered as a graded assignment for the class even though we were not entirely familiar with the content we were being tested on. It felt like the test was weaponized. If the students did not do well, the teachers would be poorly rated and therefore face the consequences from higher administration at the school or from even the district.

In previous years, my grades had suffered from these tests and that was my one and only concern. Every time a teacher would make the announcement, I felt dread. However, the impacts

of this specific test were different. The teacher told the class that he would not be grading this one, which took some weight off my shoulders at the end of senior year and sparked joy amongst my classmates who were not all seniors.

While the students appreciated this change, there were some negative impacts on the teachers. I did not care at all for this assessment in the first place because I felt that it dehumanized our classroom experience and took away hours of time which could be spent improving our skills.

Shortly before the test began, the class was chatting and one of my friends, a junior, sat next to me and said, “You should just let me take the test for you and see how quickly I can finish it.” My immediate internal reaction to this was that there was no way I would let him sabotage my answers because I still cared about my score. However, after some further thought, I began to consider what would really go wrong if I let him do this. Would my grade suffer? No. Would I get in trouble? No. Would I be able to work on tasks that actually mattered to my education? Yes. So, I eventually said, “Sure, you can take it. I don’t really care.”

Unsurprisingly, my score for the test ended up being terrible but I felt a sense of pride for being able to play a small part in sabotaging the results of a test that had caused me so much misery throughout the years. The test was powerless because it did not benefit or harm me in any way. Looking back on these actions years later, I recognize that this was not the best way to approach this test. Even though I did not approve of the teacher, it is positive that my score on the assessment came back to harm him in a negative way. Additionally, it could have harmed the image of the school in comparison to the district. What I now draw from this situation is that this test (and all others) hold far too much power over people in schools including administration, staff, and students. Not only did my actions misrepresent my actual knowledge, but they

misrepresented the progress of the school entirely. How can an assessment that can be administered in under two hours be used to accurately determine the quality of learning of a student? Standardized tests are efficient but they inaccurately represent the knowledge of students and the proficiency of teachers.

Despite being a simple act of teenage rebellion, this story will stick with me for the rest of my life, primarily because I now view it in a different light. At the time, I was a frustrated student who did not want to spend my time taking an assessment which did not seem to have any connection to my school experience. Part of that frustration still exists within me and to this day, my life is still affected by the results of standardized tests such as the MTELs which determine whether or not I have what it takes to be a teacher. I regret what I did because I now see how my results impacted the district; not because I find the test important. The “importance” of this test should not exist in the quantity which it does; that is part of the problem.

The district assessment which I skewed the data for was not as important as the SAT, ACT, or any other tests which are used to determine student readiness for college or other educational experiences. Because of this, I disregarded its effect on my peers, teachers, and administrators. As I look back on this situation, I recognize that I was completely oblivious. However, not only was I oblivious to the unfortunate importance of standardized testing, but I was not aware of testing alternatives and methods of combating them in productive ways. Opt-out movements against certain standardized tests are used in specific parts of the country and they are entirely legal, but nobody seems to know about them. Unfortunately, this is intentional. Schools do not want parents to join opt-out movements because without sufficient data from standardized testing, schools fear that they will not receive adequate funding. If I had opted-out of this district assessment rather than randomizing my answers, my negative results would have

never existed, therefore providing no data to be used against the school. This is an option that more parents need to be aware of especially in Massachusetts where a false reality is promoted that students need to pass the MCAS in order to graduate high school. Additionally, the MCAS ultimately defines academia within schools at all grade levels. Schools that do not achieve high MCAS scores are viewed as “bad”.

To address this problem, I collaborated with two other members of my Community, Youth, and Education cohort: Rebekah Etique and Sophia Poulin. We worked to address the harms associated with standardized and high stakes tests by interviewing community members who have had experience with these types of tests and compiling information about the opt-out movement on accessible platforms. I wanted to understand the relationship between general standardized tests, high-stakes standardized tests, and the opt-out movement. In my research, I asked the following questions: (1) Why isn't the opt-out option more well known? (2) Based on the opinions of parents, teachers, and education professionals, what is the general perception of the opt-out movement in response to standardized tests? (3) What are the detrimental outcomes of standardized tests that create the need for the further publicization of the opt-out movement?. Standardized and high stakes tests at local, state, and national levels can have a detrimental impact on students; educators and parents need to be informed about the choice to opt-out of these tests so that they can make the decision they think is best for their students.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 History

The history of standardized testing in the United States dates back to the early 1900's. The first usage of a standardized test was seen during World War I when the United States Military

instituted the Army Alpha and Beta tests in 1917. These tests, created by the then President of the American Psychological Association, Robert M. Yerkes, were used to measure the intelligence of the recruits. Specifically, the goal of these tests were to determine which recruits were “mentally inferior” and which were considered to have “superior mental ability.” The basis of these tests were also of Eugenicist ideals where it was thought that people of color would have a lower IQ, making it another reason why people of color were unable to serve in the military. Within the next ten years, the institution of standardized testing within schools is seen. Carl Bringham designed the Scholastic Aptitude Test, or the SAT, and the first usage was seen in 1926. The test, distributed to high school students, was used as a form of gatekeeping to predict who would excel in college and who would not (Singer, 2019).

In 1959, a professor at the University of Iowa, Franklin Lindquist, created American College Testing, or ACT. This test included a section that was intended to guide students towards a profession through asking questions about their interests. The ACT tests on math, reading and English, and on scientific principles. What makes the ACT different from the SAT is the composition of the test. The ACT is geared towards measuring accumulated information from an individual whereas the SAT is centered on testing logic (Fletcher, 2009).

In 1993 a law called the Massachusetts Education Reform Act (MERA) was passed in order to improve public education across the state (McCaleb-Kahan & Wenner, 2009). This law resulted in the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) which was created to meet the requirements stated by the new law. As McCaleb-Kahan and Wenner (2009) explain, “The MCAS testing program assesses all students including special needs students and LEP (limited English proficient) students enrolled in public schools” (p. 2). The MCAS test is also a graduation requirement in the state of Massachusetts (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and

Secondary Education [MDESE], n.d.). Each student must earn a passing score in English Language Arts, mathematics, and one science test (biology, chemistry, introductory physics, technology/engineering). If these tests are not passed by 10th grade, students may retest until they earn a passing grade in order to graduate (MDESE, n.d.).

While Massachusetts was a leader in the creation of state testing, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandated and popularized standardized tests nationwide. This act brought testing to the top of the nation's educational agenda (Yaffe et. al., 2008). This mandated states to test students in reading and math in grades three through eight, and once more in high school (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction). The stated aim of this policy was to close the academic achievement gaps through identifying struggling districts and students and providing them with assistance (Yaffe et. al., 2008).

2.2 Teacher Autonomy

Autonomy in the classroom has been on a decrease since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 because of the standardized testing mandates (Yaffe et. al., 2008). These mandates restricted curriculum and the power that teachers held over the design because of the need to educate their students on the content of the tests so that they would do well. We see an even further decline in 2009 when the Common Core Standards became more utilized and implemented across the country (Tampio, 2018). The Common Core describes in detail what students in grades K-12 should be taught and has displaced state developed frameworks for teaching and educating our youth. In his book, author Nicholas Tampio (2018) states that this new method may be productive in raising the educational bar for some students, but overall the costs outweigh the benefits. Tampio also asserts that democracies should work to disperse the

educational authority instead of having one philosophy around education controlled by one central group.

The standards put into place by testing as well as by the Common Core have led to the idea referred to as “teaching for the test.” The concept of this is centered around the focus of curriculum being on material that will be tested rather than relaying information that teachers, situated in the local context, deem valuable and appropriate. Wheelock (2003) states that “schools may be more focused on producing higher test scores in order to look good than on making improvements in teaching and learning that result in authentically better schooling for all students (p. 4). In turn, they are losing their most valuable students. Finding ways to assess non-cognitive skills would be a productive way in measuring the development and improvement of alternate skills that students will need in order to succeed in college and the workplace instead of the memorization of facts. The central idea found behind standardized tests is measuring the improvement of students, but behind that it is a measure of accountability for teachers. One must think, though, is this accurate since all students learn differently? As Yaffe (2008) points out, “The bottom line is that only teachers can use assessment day to day to support the learning of their students” (p. 5). After all, teachers are the ones spending the most time with their students, so they would be the ones most fit to find an accurate way to measure improvement and development.

2.3 Cultural Capital

A firm correlation between cultural capital and the educational outcomes of test takers has been identified in the research. Testing may be advertised as a useful mechanism for assessing knowledge, but is also reflective of a much broader, more complex set of social phenomena involving racial and economic disparities (Clayton, 2019). As Singer (2019) reflects, “After all,

what is a standardized test but an assessment that refers to a specific standard? And that standard is white, upper class students” (n.p.). In other words, these students will receive the highest average scores on standardized tests. In tandem, it is among suburban and rural areas, higher performing public schools, and schools with a higher proportion of white students, that we are seeing larger percentages of students opting-out (Clayton, 2019). While this factual standing discludes an even larger scale of children across the nation, it is of demanding nature that we see an end to this culturally-handicapping tool.

It’s a problematic assumption that the results of standardized tests are an accurate representation of the knowledge being taught within a school or school system (Clayton, 2019). Educational leaders know that their federal education funding is tied to student test results each year. Therefore, they are fearful of making students and families aware that they have the option to opt-out of tests. So, it is the education systems in low economic areas that suffer the most from this conflict because the parents are not effectively made aware of their options (Levy, 2016, p. 56). This dilemma perpetuates the issue of “heightened achievement gaps” between students’ varying background of race, ethnicity and class differences (Yaffe et. al., 2008).

Testing retains a history of racial-biases against students of color embedded by the original intentions of test-designers. These test makers included many supporters of the eugenicist movement who believed people of color had lower IQs. The early tests, such as the SATs, were inherently and intentionally racist and filled with culture biases. When mandated testing originated during this time, testing was believed by eugenicists as a way to further enhance the Jim Crow Laws (Singer, 2019). The process of opting-out requires that parents are made aware of the possibility; but the unfortunate truth is that the majority of parents who are aware of this option are the most politically connected and educated which is why they tend to be commonly from

middle-class, suburban, and white homes (Clayton, 2019). It is not typically a practice that is promoted by schools. In fact, some higher educators believe that removing such testing opportunities would “compromise educational equality and fail to accurately evaluate teachers” (Levy, 2016, 58). However, the performance of a teacher cannot be reduced to the scores of his or her students on a test during a given year. Class proficiency changes from year to year and there are countless other teacher qualities which need to be prioritized.

2.4 Accountability and Performance Expectations

In any educational setting, establishing standards of accountability can be beneficial to help ensure the best possible results. The concept is fairly simple; when a specific group performs at a high level they will be rewarded and when they perform at a low level they will be punished. In the 1990s, the federal government “established and defined the concept of accountability to set standards in learning” (Esposito, 2003, p. 2). This system was enacted with positive intentions, but it is not realistic given the diversity of schools throughout the country. Additionally, it would prove to have severely negative impacts on the schools which would need more assistance in ensuring student success. Accountability can be an effective tool in an individual classroom but it is not as effective at a larger scale. For example, teachers can hold students accountable by rewarding (or punishing) them for completing certain tasks by the end of the school day. Because teachers have personal relationships with their students, accountability tends to be an effective method.

Throughout the United States, schools tend to be racially segregated due to factors related to segregation in housing. The standard to which many schools are held accountable refers to that of the “typical” student. In the eyes of test makers, the “typical student” refers to the performance of the average white, middle to upper class individual (Singer, 2019). When schools with less

academic resources due to the socioeconomic conditions of the individuals in the surrounding area are forced to administer tests which cater to a more prepared demographic, it is obvious that they will not perform as well. Also, it is important to consider that “Students who opt out of testing tend to come from districts and demographic groups associated with higher levels of performance” (Cremata, 2019, p. 3). So, students who have a better statistical chance of scoring higher on a test based on their race and economic status, are the same students who are made most aware of the option to not take the test.

Students should only be tested on knowledge which is relevant to what they have been taught in school. To combat negative standards of accountability, “districts should consider explicitly adjusting for the characteristics of the students who actually sit for tests” when creating the tests by which they are measured (Cremata, 2019, p. 1). Every student has unique needs, strengths, and weaknesses. Similarly, each school has a unique demographic of students which needs to be accounted for when creating systems of accountability.

2.5 Standardization in Tests

There is a significant difference between how standardization in tests affects schools versus the high stakes aspect of a test. When a test is high stakes, the outcome of a test will affect schools regardless of the locality. In other words, the failure of one of these tests may result in a student not being able to graduate whether it was administered at a school, district, or state level. Additionally, the term “high stakes” refers to the employment status of teachers and perceived success of specific schools and districts based on test scores. Simply stated, the results of a high-stakes test will have consequences for a specific group or groups. However, the “standards” being measured in a test can be applied at a school, district, or state level. Certain standards can

negatively impact students if they are administered too broadly. For example, two towns being held to the same standard in completely different parts of a state will likely show different results due to factors such as culture, average family income, school size, or teaching staff. The national implementation of standardized tests is attributed to “the second Bush administration’s reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB)” enacted in 2001 (Clayton). However, NCLB did not set the specific standards to which schools would be held. This was introduced later with the implementation of Common Core in 2009 (Tampio, 2018).

3. A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Broad Framework

In creating our Praxis project, my research partners and I came together to address a common interest: standardized testing. Through our experiences within the Worcester Public Schools, as well as our own educational experiences, we have seen how standardized tests can negatively impact the success of students. Specifically, the most “vulnerable students” in terms of score proficiency, are at higher risk of not completing school due to the fact that districts are overly focused on making average scores as high as possible (Wheelock, p.4, 2003). I worked to unpack the term “detrimental” in relation to student success and how standardization and the high-stakes aspect of testing create a negative educational environment. Through my research, I have come to the conclusion that “detriment” as a result of testing refers to three related consequences: A sub-par educational experience for students, a lack of agency for teachers, and gratuitous comparisons between students, teachers, schools districts, and states. Rather than serving schools in positive ways, it “interfere[s] with good teaching and learning” (Phelps, p.7, 1999) This directly ties into the existence of the opt-out movement and why, despite the effects of this type of testing, it is not

a more common practice. The additional concepts that we built off of are from the work of FairTest as well as Citizens for Public Schools; organizations that work toward the abolition of high-stakes standardized tests and provide resources for those looking to learn about the opt-out movement and the harms of standardized testing. Through speaking with representatives of these organizations as well as browsing the resources displayed on their websites, we crafted our Praxis project. These organizations work to limit, and hopefully terminate, the use of standardized testing. By referencing their resources and referring back to their work, we were able to come up with our one semester project that addresses the opt-out option in Massachusetts. We interviewed various subject groups that were affected by standardized testing. We then took this information and relayed it through social media postings and a website.

4. METHODS

Co-Written in partiality by Aidan Moffatt, Rebekah Etique, and Sophia Poulin

4.1 Methodological Stance

My, as well as my two partners, original methodologies for this thesis were situated in the idea of conducting a participatory action research project, or PAR. The three of us have experience in YPAR, youth participatory action research, thanks to a class that we took with Eric DeMeulenaere at Clark University. The idea behind PAR is learning through action (Baum et. al., 2006). The idea behind conducting a PAR project was to allow our participants the opportunity to enact change that is meaningful to them in a way that is meaningful to them within their communities. As Baum, MacDougall, and Smith stated,

Firstly, it focuses on research whose purpose is to enable action... Secondly, PAR pays careful attention to power relationships, advocating for power to be deliberately shared between the researcher and the researched: blurring the line between them until the researched become the researchers... Thirdly, PAR contrasts with less dynamic approaches that remove data and information from their contexts. (Baum et. al., 2006)

Our initial goal was to adopt this practice and empower our participants to lead us in a direction that they saw as important-within the realm of high stakes standardized testing- while we assisted them, collected data, and formed our theses. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic required us to shift our methodology into one that we were able to conduct while following the health guidelines that were brought on by the pandemic.

With the pandemic, we switched to an interview method in order to collect our data. Our goal was to collect data from willing participants that we could then distribute to the public concerning high stakes standardized testing. My partners and I chose this form of research because, as Fontana and Frey stated, "...with the assumption that interviewing results in true and accurate pictures of respondents' selves and lives" (Fontana & Frey, 2005), if we were not able to study our participants as they worked, like we planned with PAR, then our hope was to collect accurate data that gave a good representation of how those that are impacted by high stakes standardized testing feel as well as what their experiences were like. The form of interviewing as a method of research exists as surveys, open-ended questioning, opinion-polling, structured interviewing and is most popular in the sociological field (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Our study uses open-ended questions as well as some structured interviewing. I say "some structured interviewing" as the questions that we asked our participants were different depending on their title (professional, teacher, parent, or student), but participants within the same group were asked similar questions.

4.2 Epistemological Stance

We used the methods stated above in efforts to conduct our research in a way that was in compliance with the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to this, we conducted all of our research remotely. Reflecting on our personal experiences, we all had poor memories of standardized testing and wanted to work to better understand the standardized testing system and the results, both academic and mental, that result from standardized testing practices. Because our research was conducted from the subject group that is most affected by standardized testing, our claims would be reliable, valid, and generalizable due to the fact that the information we recorded came from those that are most impacted by and most knowledgeable of standardized testing. Specifically, we wanted to conduct interviews with participants for our research. Through interviews, we were able to develop precise understandings of the opinions of our interviewees and these three on one conversations resulted in concise data. Additionally, interviews are ideal because the interviewers are able to ask follow-up questions and build upon the existing knowledge of the participant(s). In contrast, other forms of data collection, such as classroom observations, likely would not have resulted in high quality data. Directed conversations were important for our project because we wanted to develop a general understanding of the perception of standardized tests, and gather specific information from our participants.

4.3 Action Site

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all of my research was conducted remotely. This being said, we did not have a site as we were able to conduct all of our work safely from our homes.

Each of us lived in Worcester, Massachusetts while we were conducting our research. The state of Massachusetts relies heavily on state sponsored standardized testing. The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, or MCAS, is given annually to students in third through eighth grade and then once more in tenth grade (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, MA Graduation Requirements and Related Guidance, 2021). Massachusetts relies on this test as a requirement for students to graduate high school. This creates an educational culture that is reliant on standardized testing results.

4.4 Positionality

I am a high school graduate who is currently a late senior at Clark University. I identify as a white male who grew up in a middle class, rural environment. Prior to attending college, I lived on a tree farm in a town that is currently 96.74% white. These demographics were reflected in my school from kindergarten to the twelfth grade. Though I struggled at times in school, I was generally supported by my teachers and faculty. Throughout my educational career, I was subject to several standardized assessments, such as the NECAP (New England Common Assessment Program) tests, but have never taken the MCAS because I did not grow up in Massachusetts. It is also important to consider that I used to suffer from moderate testing anxiety which has significantly improved with age. Today, I do not get excessively anxious when I have to take a standardized test(s); the most recent being the MTELs (Massachusetts Test for Educator Licensure). These factors come together to affect my relationship with this Praxis project and the individuals associated with it.

4.5 Participants

The participants in our study were parents and guardians, teachers, and professionals that work(ed) within the realm of standardized testing. These participants comprised a cohort of individuals who represented several ages and experiences within education. Our research team interviewed six individuals in total: five women and one man. These individuals, all above the age of 18, are representative of parents, teachers, and workers in the field of education. Five of the participants have direct experience with the opt-out movement and standardized testing while the sixth was less familiar on the topic(s). Our positionality had a unique impact on the collection of data due to the variation in our participants. For example, in our conversations with education professionals, they took on a more assertive role. As researchers, we took a passive position during the interviews in order to allow the speakers to participate without significant intervention, other than occasional follow-up questions.

	Occupation(s)/Relation to schooling	Age range (in years)	Gender	Race
Participant 1:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director of special education 	30-50	Female	White
Participant 2:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10th grade teacher • 7th grade teacher 	20-30	Female	White
Participant 3:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent of four students 	30-50	Female	White
Participant 4:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent of special education student • University administrator 	50-70	Male	White
Participant 5:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-testing organization director • Parent of special education student 	50-70	Female	White
Participant 6:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Former member of the Massachusetts Board of Education • Parent of (?) students 	50-70	Female	White

4.6 Data Collection

Throughout this process, we audio recorded our individual meetings with parents, teachers, and education professionals. All participation in recorded sessions was voluntary and up to the discretion of each participant. All recordings were transcribed and only the words of consenting participants were included in these transcriptions. Along with audio recordings, we collected field notes after each meeting with a participant.

4.7 Data Analysis

To preserve the foundation of proper data collection, we completed an analytical review of the data collected by each participant interview which was held. This allowed me to investigate the deeper meaning to the answers of my conceptual framework, which was brought into question. All transcripts were given the opportunity to be analyzed multiple times, with specific attention to the parents' participation prior and thus after the procedure's time frame. Based on the subject responses to the questions we asked, it was clear that their experiences with tests such as the MCAS were centered around "detriment" and negativity. Specifically, relating to my conceptual framework, the concepts of standardization and high stakes outcomes were what most contributed to these experiences. Those with experience with the opt-out movement were able to partially alleviate the negative effects of testing while those with no experiences held misconceptions about the opt-out movement itself, and standardized testing, in general.

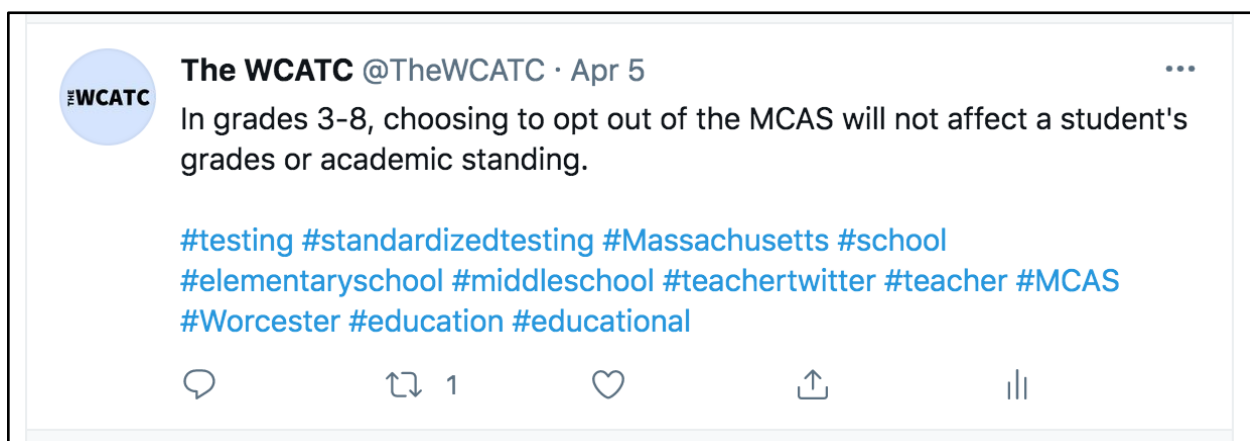
5. FINDINGS

5.1 Inspirations and the Desire for Change in Education

For our project, we sought to educate families on the availability to opt-out their children from high-stakes standardized testing. Within my thesis, I examine the harms of standardization in the classroom, the opt-out process and the experiences of our participants, as well as the general perception of standardized tests. Among my concerns with high-stakes standardized tests were the effects they have on parents, students, and teachers and the lack of awareness of legal opt-out options. Through collaboration with organizations such as FairTest and Citizens for Public Schools, I have learned about the many ways they are detrimental to students. In addition to drawing on my own experiences and the experiences of my co-researchers with testing, we also learned from the experiences of children in Worcester, Massachusetts. Additionally, we spoke with different representatives of anti-testing organizations and examined the resources available on their websites in order to communicate what we have learned with families. We communicated these lessons by compiling important knowledge on standardized testing and the opt-out movement on our website.

Our team wanted to gather the opinions and stories of parents, teachers, and education workers with a range of experiences involved with education and standardized testing. Many of these interviewees had strong opinions on standardized and high stakes tests based on initiatives to remove them, discredit them, and/or opt-out of them. Specifically, we wanted to gather more information on the general perception of the opt-out movement and how it has played out in schools and communities. Our primary focus regarding the concept of opting-out was in relation to the MCAS which is notorious for its high stakes aspect and excessive time consumption, not only during the administration of the test, but also the many days, weeks and months that teachers

often focus on preparing their students for these tests. We found that the lack of awareness of the MCAS opt-out movement is primarily attributed to a lack of information on the topic. Based on the interviews and other research, we created a hub of online resources for parents to use as a guide for opting-out. In addition to explaining the process, these resources contain facts and information which highlight the potential consequences of standardized and high stakes testing.



Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the process of our praxis research was heavily impacted by the unprecedented social effects of the national health crisis. The Theory of Change to this group thesis had the original intent of educating parents of the opt-out process of standardized testing

through in-person meetings. However, state-mandated health restrictions withheld our ability to conduct in-person meetings and caused us to rearrange our process for both the gathering and dissemination of our data. With these restrictions, we decided to switch to a podcast model in order to conduct our research. The opportunity for our project to gather and share information through a series of podcast interviews was planned but was subsequently rejected by our university's Institutional Review Committee, indicating that we would have to protect expert's privacy rights. This led us to ultimately turn to the project we finally implemented. These repeated modifications both delayed the time we had to disseminate the information and the ability for it to reach broader audiences. Nevertheless, with the privilege of interviewing educators, parents and students on their knowledge and experiences with educational testing and opting out of testing, we succeeded in creating a social media network to serve as an educational platform for distributing useful knowledge for educators, students, and families on the dangers of standardized testing and the process for opting out. The goal of testing opt-out movements is to make test results invalid and eventually abolish standardized tests in schools. Our opt-out resources will continue to exist even though our project is complete, so that we hope it will continue to reach people.

6. Educational Detriment and the Opt-Out Movement

6.1 General State Standardization and Testing Culture

The requirement of meeting a state-mandated standard within a given school can result in a rigid curriculum and change the culture of a school. One parent recalls how in her childrens' school, the "library was closed... with a big sign [that said] "testing in progress" (Parent interview, 3/12/2021). According to her, this sends a message to students that these tests (the MCAS in this case) are vital to student success. However, setting a standard for a school to meet is not inherently

damaging. In fact, systems of accountability are beneficial. When used correctly, systems of accountability motivate teachers and students to do their best work in relation to other schools. For example, the assignment of a long-term portfolio is an effective method of accountability that can be utilized by teachers for students. It is only when consequences for failure are introduced that the tests become damaging. It is also important to consider the effects of “teaching to the test” in schools. Not only do testing standards limit the ability of teachers to facilitate a personalized curriculum, but it can prevent students from getting the learning experiences they need in order to receive a valuable, effective education. The average student will gain more knowledge from experiences such as field trips, guest speakers, and hands-on activities more so than traditional lectures and test preparation. What makes this worse is that the consequences of teaching to the test and general testing culture impact “recent immigrants and low income families” the most (Educational professional interview, 1/15/2021). State standardization results in “testing culture” within schools. Testing culture is detrimental to schools because it forces teachers to educate their students in a way that will ensure the highest possible results on tests. This lack of agency results in a negative sense of competition between students, teachers, schools, districts, and states.

6.1.1 State Standardization: Racial and Economic Biases

Underperforming schools experience the consequences of state standardized tests more so than others. In these institutions, local and national systems of government expect teachers to enforce a “drill and kill” mentality so that the highest possible test results can be achieved. Once again, this style of teaching removes so many of the valuable aspects of what it means to get a meaningful, valuable education. However, it is effective for the process of memorizing specific facts and methods, both of which are valuable testing skills. Large-scale standardized tests such as

the MCAS have a history of “trying to segregate out certain people”; specifically, minority racial and ethnic groups (Parent interview, 3/26/2021). This “segregation” is perpetuated by many aspects of standardized tests but the clearest examples lie within some of the questions themselves. One teacher highlights the fact that “context is not neutral” and holding all students to the same standard in a diverse state, such as Massachusetts, can implicate student scores (Teacher interview, 3/26/2021). Racial bias in testing is best seen in English, Social Studies, and Language Arts subjects. In 2019, an essay question on the 10th grade MCAS asked students to “write a journal entry from the perspective of a white woman who used derogatory language against a young runaway slave and was reluctant to hide her in her home” (Vaznis, 2019). Soon after this question appeared on the exam, it was removed due to widespread (and justified) claims of insensitivity. This example is an outlier which showcases outright racism. The majority of racist biases are much more ingrained and covert. In fact, the specific language used in the questions on standardized tests may affect a student’s ability to give correct answers. For example, one question on the TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) asked students to answer the following question: If an orange represents the size of the moon, which of the following would best represent the size of the earth? The students had to choose between a cantaloupe, grape, lime, or cherry for their answer. At surface level, this may seem like a fair question but it requires students to have a pre-existing knowledge of what these fruits look like in comparison to an orange; it tests more than what the question was meant to assess. This poses specific challenges for “English language learner[s], or [impoverished] students who likely do not eat as much fruit” (dkppkd, 2013). While specific questions such as the previous example add a layer of bias to standardized tests, the concept of holding individual schools to certain standards is not inherently negative. However, testing is not the most effective method for doing this. In fact, one education worker and parent who has done

work to support the abolition of the MCAS states that the problem “isn’t the existence of standardized tests, per se... the thing that makes them really bad is the way they’re used” (Education professional interview, 1/15/2021). In other words, they exist partially to “hold back” certain students. This, in addition to the social complexities intertwined with standardized tests, are what result in their negative impact on some communities. For minority students, the term “sub-par” is an understatement when it comes to the relationship between detriment and standardized testing. They are intentionally held back by repressed methods of segregation and white supremacy. Standardized test results can cause minority groups to be negatively classified and compared to wealthy, white communities which is unwarranted and damaging.

6.1.2 General District Standardization

Standardization applied at a district or school level shows better results than at the state or national level; localized data can be acted upon more effectively. One New Hampshire administrator tells us that she is “not a fan of standardized testing at a state level... [but she is] a fan of it at the district level” (Education professional interview, 4/7/2021). In this case, she claims that the content on these district tests is more customizable and the teachers are effectively able to make more meaning from the results. Because the localized test creators have a better sense of what is being taught, they are able to create more applicable tests for a given area. However, this is not to say that there will not still be gaps in what is taught and what is tested. Additionally, when these tests are created and monitored at a local level, creators are able to better account for the student population. For example, the same administrator praises her school as being able to provide an adequate testing environment and parameters for special education students and students on IEPs. At school and district levels of assessment, schools also have the potential to assess students

using methods other than testing. To fully assess student learning, schools “need to refine [...] academic standards, redesign [...] assessment regime to answer a larger set of questions, and develop new kinds of tests that assess new kinds of skills” (Yaffe, 2008 p. 6). One Worcester teacher expresses her desire for the creation of a portfolio based method of assessment that shows student mastery of several specific standards. While this method would be effective, it is “not something you can easily measure” (Teacher interview, 3/26/2021). As a result, standardized tests are the most efficient option but are only able to show a fraction of knowledge. Ironically, testing has resulted in a misguided narrowing of curricula which, in turn, limits what is both taught and learned in schools; and testing further narrows what is deemed as being valuable knowledge. The detrimental effects of testing are lessened as methods of assessment become more personalized for the student groups that they are measuring. Both teaching and learning are incredibly complex tasks which cannot be quantified; it is both wrong to assume that a test is able to accurately represent academic proficiency and that other methods of assessment would be “easy” to implement and analyze.

6.2 The High Stakes Aspect of Testing

Not all standardized tests have a high stakes outcome but the MCAS is high stakes at every level because of the effects it can have on schools, teachers, and students. However, in several states, students are expected to achieve a proficient score on standardized tests in order to prove that they are qualified to graduate from high school. Massachusetts, one of the highest performing academic states, utilizes the results of the MCAS to determine whether or not a student can graduate. Interestingly, the MCAS was never meant to serve as a graduation requirement. Rather, it was created as a method to survey student achievement and create a general set of curriculum

standards for the state. Ironically, it was also created with the intention of providing monetary “rewards” to high-scoring schools to serve as motivation (Wheelock, 2004). As a result of the implementation of this high stakes aspect, the MCAS has negatively impacted parents, students, and teachers.

A significant amount of stress can fall on the parents and guardians of students who may be at risk of failing a high-stakes test, especially when students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) who are part of the special education programming are involved. They come into the testing setting with an entirely different set of academic, and potentially social, experiences. One parent describes her worry when learning that her son, who was on an IEP, may be required to pass the MCAS in order to graduate. She said that this situation could be “problematic” and it “got [her] started organizing a local group in her town... with a bunch of other mothers of kids on IEPs... [who] started a chapter of the statewide organization that was trying to organize to [end the] MCAS a graduation requirement” (Parent interview, 1/15/2021). This desire for change is not necessarily inspired by the idea that these tests measure standards. Rather, they can be harmful in the sense that they only provide a tiny window into a student’s academic experiences but are ultimately able to determine success or failure.

Related to the stress of parents is obviously the pressure experienced by students which may come from their teachers, administrators, or parents themselves. In Massachusetts, the MCAS is a high stakes test which can prevent students from graduating if they fail the test which is administered in the tenth grade. The other sections, given to students from grades three to eight, are not considered high stakes in terms of the graduation requirement, but a lot of pressure falls on teachers, schools, and districts to achieve high scores. One student from Sherborn, Massachusetts decided to opt-out of the tenth grade MCAS and was not able to attend the traditional graduation

ceremony despite having proficient “grades, the projects, the recommendations,” and everything else required for graduation. However, the fallout from this decision did not have a significant negative impact on this student in the long run; they still “got into whatever college of their choice and their life is fine and exciting and normal” (Parent interview, 3/12/2021). This 2020-21 school year, Massachusetts high school students have been able to “get diplomas without passing all the MCAS” tests due to the pandemic which has resulted in a remote academic year, in most areas, which can be significantly more challenging to foster effective learning (Education professional interview, 1/15/2021). When this weight was removed from the shoulders of high school students, they were able to focus more on their learning rather than whether they can pass a high stakes test. When the high stakes element is removed during a non-remote year, students will be alleviated from a significant amount of stress. One teacher explains that sometimes, there are “a few seniors who are in a position where they still haven’t passed [the high stakes MCAS]. There is a waiver that... some of [her] school usually applies for” but it is only granted, usually after multiple attempts, if the students have a proficient attendance record (Teacher interview, 3/26/2021). What is most interesting about the high stakes element of the MCAS is that there is no sliding scale or method of comparing the relationship between other factors in a school such as attendance and grades. Test creators state that there is a certain score “that you need to reach and if you are one point below that level, then you [have not mastered the content]. And if you’re one point above it, you’re fine” (Education professional interview, 1/15/2021). Students need to exist in an academic environment where personal experiences, goals, and passions are valued more highly than a score on a test.

After conducting our interviews, I have come to realize that the term “high stakes” does not solely apply to the graduation status of seniors in high school. Additionally, the high stakes

MCAS has an effect on the success of teachers in several different ways. During an academic year, a teacher is provided with a set of standards which they are required to teach to their students. These standards can be effectively met, but if classes taught by a specific teacher consistently show sub-proficient test results, this teacher is at risk of losing his or her job. If teachers do not “teach to the test”, they are especially at risk of facing the consequences of failure (Esposito, 2004). Test results do not show letter grades received in the class, student enjoyment, or the benefits of localized experiences which may contribute to student learning more than anything else. The other aspect of high stakes testing which implicates teachers is their ability to speak out against the tests. One parent states that a lot of “teachers... don’t publicly ever say that [they are against the MCAS]” (Parent interview, 3/12/2021). She suspects that they are likely to experience repercussions for expressing these opinions. The high-stakes aspect of standardized testing does not just implicate student success; it affects every individual involved in the education process at a school. Rather than fostering motivation, high-stakes tests perpetuate fear which has detrimental effects in school communities. When teachers are afraid of students failing tests, they are forced to narrow their curriculum which results in diminished educational quality for the students, who are also afraid of failing.

6.3 Opt-Out Experience and Knowledge:

Standardized and high-stakes testing can highly affect the success of students in an educational environment. Tangentially, others who may suffer from their results include teachers, parents, and administrators. A school is a place where the curiosity and passion of young learners needs to be utilized, inspired, and directed by educators. When harmful tests exist, this cannot be effectively carried out. However, in some cases, opting-out of these tests is an option for parents.

Though it is not as common as it should be, the opt-out movement is passionately practiced by parents throughout Massachusetts and the rest of the country. This movement can be described as “a grassroots movement of parents concerned about overtesting, teaching to the test, and a lack of transparency” (Edelman, 2016). While it has been in existence for years, it is uncommon in most educational institutions. However, the movement is beginning to see a rise in support from other parents, teachers, and administrators working in the field of education. Our interviews highlight these details and inspired our online efforts.

Many schools attempt to “suppress” awareness of the opt-out movement and want parents to be under the impression that the act of opting-out a student is a complicated process (Strauss, 2015). However, according to one parent, it is simple. Every year, she “give[s] a letter... just so it’s dated and put in... an official file. It [is not] anything complicated”. As the years have progressed, the school has “gotten better at accommodating what... [her children] are doing during [testing] time” (Parent interview, (3/12/2021)). When she first started opting out, the school was confused about what the students would be doing to fill in that time. Now, they are able to read and draw; this is not ideal, but one of the only viable options. This same parent does not have a child who has taken the 10th grade MCAS tests; her oldest is in the 8th grade for the 2020-2021 academic year. So far, She has encountered minimal to no repercussions from opting-out, but when the student enters the 10th grade, there will be a “serious discussion” about the potential of not receiving a diploma. As referenced, the interviewee mentions another parent who had gone through this process with his/her tenth grade student. The result of this action was that the student was unable to attend the graduation ceremony; a symbolic milestone which represents the completion of 13 years of hard work and transition into adult life. No student should be denied this opportunity.

The majority of interviewees suggest that, fortunately, administrators in many Massachusetts districts are becoming more accepting of the opt-out movement despite the consequences schools may face if a vast majority of students do not take the MCAS. As Cremata (2019) states, “The number of students opting out of standardized tests has grown in recent years” (p. 1). A parent reflected that when she first started to opt-out her children from the MCAS, that it was an “education process for some of the teachers and the administration.” This process has allowed the school to more effectively respond to others who have expressed an interest in opting-out. Additionally, since she has committed to the process, she has seen “a change in awareness in the community about the problems around testing” (Parent interview, 3/12/2021). In another interview, a teacher claimed that her administrators were also supportive of these decisions but that “it is the school’s duty to try to convince parents that they should take the MCAS” (Teacher interview, 3/26/2021). For administrative workers, this introduces a unique predicament because regardless of whether or not they support the MCAS, the school still needs to show measures of accountability. So, if a significant percentage of students do not participate in the MCAS, it completely invalidates the data at any school. When schools do not have enough test results, penalties for low scores cannot be justified.

Based on our research, I believe that awareness of the opt-out movement is not as widespread as it should be, given its accessibility and benefits. Additionally, the more people who participate, the more of a powerful message it sends to the government enforcing these standards. Perhaps the most common misconception about the movement is that the process itself is complicated. In an interview, one parent stated that he does not “know much about the opt out process but [he doesn’t] think it’s very easy to do” (Parent interview, 4/19/2021). This is not the case. In fact, as another parent mentioned, all that needs to be done is to write a letter to the school

stating that your child will not participate. These myths exist to deter parents from engaging in the opt-out process. Further along in the interview, the misconceived parent questioned why the process of opting-out should exist in the first place. He stated that “families have the right to make the choices” that would be best for them and especially the student who will be taking the test. This is an opinion that I agree with; ideally, the opt-out movement would not exist because over-generalized methods of measurement and accountability should not exist in education. However, the current goal should be to encourage the movement and make it as well-known as possible. The opt-out movement becomes more effective as more people participate. When more people are involved, the general negative perception of standardized tests increases. Additionally, higher numbers of people opting-out affect the data provided by tests so that it cannot be used to accurately represent schools, and in turn, weaponized. As more individuals and communities participate, the detrimental effects of testing will diminish. Teachers will feel less pressure to “teach to the test” and drastically increase agency over their teaching practices. As a result, educational experiences for students will improve. The online resources created by our research team were created with this intent. The easy to navigate resources such as our website and other information was created with the intention of being as clear as possible. Additionally, this clarity promotes the fact that the act of opting-out is not as difficult as it is made out to be.

7. CONCLUSION

7.1 Summary

The Worcester County Anti-Testing Collaborative experienced significant changes throughout the course of our work; social, communal, and global. Originally, our intention with the project was to gather data to develop a general understanding of the opinions on standardized

tests and the opt-out movement, specifically in Massachusetts. Based on our data, we planned on compiling the experiences and knowledge of those involved with the opt-out movement and abolition of standardized tests such as the MCAS to create an accessible environment for parents to learn more about the topics. Originally, this seminar would have been an in-person series of events. However, due to the restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of COVID-19, we were tasked with entirely redesigning our project. Carrying out research and intervention for a university major titled “Community, Youth, and Education Studies” is significantly more difficult when community members are not able to gather and educational institutions are not able to meet in-person for the safety of the public.

Though these factors significantly impacted the course of the project, we were still committed to gathering data on the implications of standardized tests and the local opt-out movement. We found that although these resources for parents exist, the availability is not effectively advertised and the majority of the parent population is not made aware of what is available to them. In other words, I would not consider the opt-out movement as “popular” but it is becoming more common. This “suppression” is likely intentional.

Thanks to online video-call platforms, our research team was able to meet with certain individuals to conduct interviews. We spoke with a collection of parents, teachers, and various other types of workers in the field of education throughout the course of our research. Based on their experiences and information they provided, we reflected on the common themes which stood out in our conversations. Primarily, these themes centered around personal negative experiences with standardized tests in the classroom and opting-out as an uncommon but valuable action taken by parents. Prior to and following these interviews, we created a hub of social media resources which would be available to individuals interested in the opt-out, or who have no knowledge of it

at all; which proved to be one of the primary reasons as to why the movement has not become more popular.

Tests become harmful when an over-generalized level of standardization does not allow for an accurate survey of academic proficiency. When these standardized tests also become high-stakes, that is when they have the most detrimental impacts. So, the opt-out movement needs to be more advertised and made accessible to all populations. Standardization in tests, high-stakes outcomes, and a lack of awareness of the opt-out movement all come together to create a harmful environment for students in schools.

7.2 Theoretical Implications

This research made clear the need for an increased awareness of the opt-out movement based on the effects of standardized and high stakes tests such as the MCAS. However, the intervention, which involved the transmission of this information, uncovered more aspects of this which should be highlighted. For example, information about opting-out should not be made available using a single platform or method. Not all communities and families have the same access to specific resources. In other words, for one family, the best method of learning about opting-out may be at an in-person forum while another family would be better suited to conduct their own research on a website, such as the one we developed for our project. Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, our research team was not able to host in-person meetings; a factor which would have affected our findings.

Though the intervention could have been advertised more effectively, other aspects of the conceptual framework were proven to be legitimate through the research conducted by my team. For students, teachers, parents, and even administrators, it was shown that standardized tests can

have a detrimental impact on their ability to act in the education system. Through my standardized testing research, I defined “detriment” in education as leading to a sub-par experience for students, a lack of agency for teachers, and a culture where negative comparisons made between students, teachers, schools, districts, and states perpetuated. This definition was primarily based on the experiences of our interviewees, most of whom are highly involved in the opt-out movement which aims to eventually eliminate standardized testing. Therefore, alleviating detriments caused by standardized testing. While the term “detrimental” has been used frequently throughout my research and analysis, it would be interesting to see a more in-depth examination of those who tend to benefit from the results of standardized tests. In other words, upper-class white communities. Many of the negative aspects of standardized tests exist in opposition to the positive aspects that benefit these demographics.

7.3 Implications for Practice

Testing as a tool for a measurement of proficiency is difficult to use effectively. Rather than being able to measure the general knowledge of a student in a specific class, tests are only able to provide a snapshot of total learning. The results of a test assign a number to a student which may or may not accurately summarize the extent of his or her knowledge. In my classroom in the future, I intend to show my students that they are intelligent human beings who cannot be described by a single number or a single sentence. Rather, they exist as a combination of their life experiences, positive or negative, combined with their own values, goals, and inspirations in life. When schools overemphasize the importance of standardized tests, this inadvertently shows students that their intelligence can be reduced to a number, and that is what should be focused on. Although tests are a valuable tool in some instances, I will make it clear to my students that there

are aspects of learning that a test cannot measure. However, I will also work to find ways that my students can be successful test-takers without letting test-preparation overwhelm my classroom. Assuming that standardized tests such as the MCAS will still be used when I am a teacher, it will be a challenge to find the happy-medium between preparing my students for these tests while also showing them that their results do not reflect their learning capabilities. I recognize the contradiction between these efforts and admittedly do not know the best way to organize my future classrooms in order to combat standardized testing as a concept, while still working with my students to achieve high scores. This is a dilemma that I do not have a current solution for, but with more teaching experience, I will be better equipped to handle it. Just like other overwhelming societal dilemmas, there will never be an easy solution. Small but powerful steps based on experiences are the most effective method for combating these issues.

7.4 Limitations

Our research was primarily centered around the developed opinions of passionate individuals who have extensive experience with standardized tests in educational settings. In other words, the interviewees we selected were not random. Rather, these were people who were willing to talk with us most often because of their previous experiences with standardized tests and the opt-out movement. Looking back on the project, I believe that it would have been beneficial to hear more of the opinions of individuals without as much familiarity with the topic. Originally, our research group was planning on hosting seminars specifically designed for parents with limited knowledge on the opt-out movement. This type of person would have been able to provide us with direct, uninformed questions that our research team may not have even considered. Additionally, opinions from these people would have provided us with data on the perception of standardized

testing and the opt-out movement as it exists in parent/school administrator relationships. It would have been interesting to examine the concept of testing and opting-out from an outsider's perspective.

An additional limitation with our intervention involves accessibility to our information. The Covid-19 pandemic has proven that online learning is not the most effective method of education. Our original research plan would have allowed our team to meet with parents in real life to have discussions about opting-out. However, we were forced to work entirely online. In-person conversations allow for a more effective understanding of content because they require engagement and participation. Additionally, it is important to consider the fact that online platforms are not as accessible to certain populations. For example, if a family has slow internet speed at home and other people in the household are required to participate in online classes, they may not be able to sacrifice the internet consumption during certain times of day. This is assuming that they have effective and reliable technology which could allow them to make the most of our resources. All types of families should be informed about the opt-out movement; not just those who are able to sacrifice the resources and time to do so. Another challenge we ran into involved the general outreach of our website. In other words, it was difficult to effectively advertise the availability of our resources; the existence of the website on its own is not necessarily enough. Looking back on our research, our intervention would have been more effective if we had increased the knowledge of our website as a resource.

7.5 Significance

Our goal in having completed this project was to enact change in the current usage of standardized testing. The results of standardized testing in public schools loom over the heads of

every student within Massachusetts due to the graduation requirement that is currently in place. As conductors of this research, we were all impacted by the dedication and insight provided to us by our participants. It was a challenging yet educational experience for us as future educators to see how passionate the local parents, teachers, and education professionals are about ending the standardized testing position in our educational system. Despite our limitations due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the completion of this project brought a sense of pride and accomplishment to all three of us. Although it is incredibly difficult to create change to the educational system as a whole, the results of this project brought change to those who participated in the work of the Worcester County Anti-Testing Collaborative. We hope that the resources that we created, specifically our website, will continue to exist as tools for those seeking to learn about the detriment caused by standardized testing and the opt-out movement. Additionally, I hope that the opt-out movement will lead to the eventual elimination of harmful tests from schools and that our resources helped contribute to this accomplishment.

The consequences of standardized and high stakes testing need to be recognized in order for equitable education to exist. Though schools need ways to measure proficiency and hold administrators, teachers, and students accountable, standardized tests are not the most effective method. Especially considering the fact that in some cases, they can prevent a student from receiving a diploma. The “standard” by which students are upheld refers to “white, upper class students” who take tests curated and distributed by white, upper class citizens (Singer). These systems are still relied upon despite the knowledge that they put specific students at a significant disadvantage. Factors such as “student gender, student ratings of perceived teacher anxiety, student preparedness, and student socioeconomic status” all play a role in educational success (McCaleb-Kahan, 2009 p. 7). Standardized and high-stakes tests effectively uphold systemic racism and

classism. The results of tests should be used to track progress, find weak points, and empower individual schools and districts; not prevent students from graduating and over consume valuable classroom time. This is why parents and students, especially disadvantaged parents and students, should be made more aware of opting-out as an option for not taking a standardized test when possible. If the opt-out movement continues to increase in popularity, it will also prove that educational institutions can still function without the results of standardized tests. Though I never had to take the MCAS, I wish that I was made aware of the option to opt-out of other tests that I was supposedly required to take; especially the ones that I did not see as adding value to my education or general experiences as a student. Effective progress in education cannot take place until the consequences of standardized and high stakes tests are acted upon and everybody works to promote a successful environment for all.

Works Cited

- Baum, F., MacDougall, C., & Smith, D. (2006). Participatory action research. *Journal of epidemiology and community health*, 60(10), 854.
- Clayton, G., Bingham, A. J., & Ecks, G. B. (2019). Characteristics of the Opt-Out Movement: Early Evidence for Colorado. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 27(33).
- Cremata, E. J., & Stanford University, P. A. for C. E. (PACE). (2019). How Would Test Opt-Out Impact Accountability Measures? Evidence from the CORE Districts and the PACE/USC Rossier Poll. In *Policy Analysis for California Education, PACE*. Policy Analysis for California Education, PACE.
- dkppkd. "Why Are Standardized Tests Considered to Be Racially Biased?" *Reddit*, 28 Feb. 2013, www.reddit.com/r/explainlikeimfive/comments/19edyc/eli5_why_are_standardized_tests_considered_to_be/.
- Esposito, K. A. (2004). *Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS): Two districts' perspectives* (Doctoral dissertation, Johnson & Wales University).
- Edelman, J., Levy, S. Making Sense of the Opt-Out Movement. (2016). *Education Next*, 16(4), 55.
- Fontana, A., & Frey, J. H. (2005). The interview. *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*, 3, 695-727.
- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2021, May 6). *Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System*. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. <https://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/participation.html>.
- McCaleb-Kahan, P., & Wenner, R. (2009). The Relationship of Student Demographics to 10th Grade MCAS test anxiety.
- Phelps, R. P. (1999). Why Testing Experts Hate Testing. *Fordham Report*, 3(1), n1. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED429089.pdf>
- Singer, S. (2019, April 6). Standardized Testing is a Tool of White Supremacy. Retrieved from <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2019/04/06/standardized-testing-tool-white-supremacy>

- Sonnert, G., Barnett, M. D., & Sadler, P. M. (2020). Short-term and long-term consequences of a focus on standardized testing in AP calculus classes. *The High School Journal*, 103(1), 1–17. doi: 10.1353/hsj.2020.0000
- Strauss, V. (2019, April 25). *Why the movement to opt out of Common Core tests is a big deal*. The Washington Post.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2015/05/03/why-the-movement-to-opt-out-of-common-core-tests-is-a-big-deal/>.
- Vaznis, J. (2019, August 30). *Controversial MCAS question hurt scores of some black students, study finds - The Boston Globe*. BostonGlobe.com.
<https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2019/08/30/controversial-mcas-question-hurt-scores-some-black-students-study-concludes/EmGOOQgiGVNpHvrp8W5ATK/story.html>.
- Wheelock, A. (2003). School Awards Programs and Accountability in Massachusetts: Misusing MCAS Scores To Assess School Quality.
- Yaffe, Deborah|Coley, J., R., Ed, Richard, & Ed. (2008, November 30). Addressing Achievement Gaps: Educational Testing in America: State Assessments, Achievement Gaps, National Policy and Innovations. ETS Policy Notes. Volume 17, Number 1, Winter 2009.
Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED505582>