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Upper Manhattan Parents Leading Effort to Opt Kids Out of State Testing



By Jeff Maye (F www.dnainfo.com/new-york/about-us/our-team/editorial-team/jeff-maye) on March 28, 2014 9:29am
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Out of State Testing

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HARLEM — Jasmine Batista, a parent with two children at the Hamilton Heights School (<http://hamiltonheightsschool.org/>), decided to have her 8 and 10-year-old sons skip the state English and math tests this year after seeing the anxiety they were suffering over the exams.

"He couldn't sleep. He would cry and he was really nervous," Batista said about her 10-year-old, who is in fifth grade this year. "Even my third-grader, since September he's been saying: 'What if I get left back?'"

Batista's children are among 122 at the school of 245 students at Amsterdam Avenue and 147th Street who have opted out of the standardized tests so far. Advocates opposed to the rigorous exams, which are used to determine whether students pass on to the next grade and to rate both teachers and schools, say they expect up to 2,000 students will opt out this year.

The number would represent a sevenfold increase of the 276 students who opted out last year, according to the Department of Education. Schools in Northern Manhattan such as the Hamilton Heights School, Central Park East I and II, Amistad Dual Language School and Castle Bridge are leading that charge.

"We want parents to know they have a choice," said Kimberly Casteline, the mother of an 8-year-old third-grader at Hamilton Heights School.

Students who opt out of the tests are instead evaluated on a portfolio of their work from the year, which is submitted by their teachers.

Officially, DOE and state education officials maintain that there is no opt-out provision for the tests even as they allow hundreds of parents to do so, according to a sheet of frequently asked question sent out to school administrators as guidance Thursday by Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña.

"I know that there is increased attention on the state tests this year, and that this has generated some frustration. We will continue to listen to these concerns and consider them as we move forward. We trust that you will help your schools create an environment that is respectful of the diversity of opinion surrounding this issue," Fariña wrote.

Time Out From Testing (<http://timeoutfromtesting.org/index.php>), a group that is working to end the use of the state tests as a means of assessment, has a form letter for parents wanting to opt out of the test where they request that their child be marked as a "refusal."

"Parents understand testing is not teaching," said Jane Hirschmann of Time Out From Testing.

Parent Gretchen Mergenthaler has an 11-year-old son in the sixth grade at the Amistad Dual Language School in Inwood who will be opting out of the tests for the second year in a row.

When she tried to opt out of the tests last year, Mergenthaler said administrators told her that her son would be left back. She fought back and won.

"There are many other parents who are afraid to speak up," she said. "We want teachers teaching and our child's interesting work to show they have mastered the skills of their grade, not tests."

Parents said Thursday that they oppose the tests because they are not an accurate measure of whether their children are learning well, but they are not opposed to all testing.

Donnie Rotkin, an instructional coach who works at multiple public schools, said the questions are too confusing and convoluted for elementary students and stunt critical thinking and curiosity.

"The test have perverted the sense of discovery, an excitement and love of learning," said Rotkin. "Too many schools spend weeks, months, some schools...even the whole school year narrowly focused on preparing kids for these tests."

The state English Language Arts and math tests take three days each and teachers spend many more days, including before and after school, prepping kids.

Kids take the English and math tests from third to eighth grade. This year's tests begin next week.

Last year, after the city switched to a tougher test based on federal Common Core standards, test results fell precipitously (<http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20130807/civic-center/more-than-half-of-city-kids-failed-harder-state-math-reading-tests>). Just 26.4 percent of the city's third-through-eighth-grade students passed the English Language Arts test, down from 46.9 percent in 2012. About 30 percent of third-through-eighth-graders in the city passed the new math test, down from 60 percent in 2012.

Teachers are feeling pressure to make kids perform better, said Casteline, the Harlem mother, who is also a professor at Fordham University.

"If you're a teacher and your job depends on your students doing well on the test, what are you going to do in the classroom?" said Casteline. "We can't blame the teachers for that. That's how the system is set up and that's what we want to change."

With many kids at Hamilton Heights School opting out of the test, the classrooms feel more relaxed, said parents. In one classroom, 20 of the 23 students have been opted out of the test by their parents.

"That teacher doesn't have to spend the whole week teaching kids how to bubble in circles. She can teach," said Casteline.



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