

## WHAT HAS OPT OUT ACCOMPLISHED? WHAT CAN IT STILL ACCOMPLISH?

8<sup>th</sup> graders at ICE were among the first students to refuse state tests—back in 2002! However, the number of test refusals statewide remained small until the introduction of the Common Core aligned-tests in 2012. The following year, a mass bipartisan mobilization of parents burst into being centered primarily on Long Island. This movement grew in number and spread geographically—so much so that in the last two years, fully 1 out of 5 eligible students in New York state refused to take the tests. The sheer number of refuseniks has wreaked havoc on the validity of the state’s “accountability” system. Here’s what happened as a result:

- Governor Cuomo acknowledged that parents have the option to refuse the tests.
- State Commissioner of Education Elia had to backpedal after the governor’s statement; she too conceded parents had the right to refuse.
- Chancellor Tisch and 2 other Cuomo-identified Regents stepped down under pressure.
- Dr. Betty Rosa, on record as saying she would opt out her own child, was elected Chancellor after a coordinated campaign by opt out advocates. Unlike her predecessor, Rosa is actually an educator and widely viewed as a champion of quality, equitable education for all children.
- Value Added Measurement (VAM)—the complicated statistical formula used to calculate teacher “effectiveness” via student test performance—was declared “arbitrary and capricious” in a judicial ruling.
- Parent pressure led NYS Education Department to put in place a moratorium on the use of test scores for student promotion and in student transcripts. NYSED also temporarily suspended inclusion of state ELA and math test scores in teacher ratings.
- The opt out movement in NYS has sparked and inspired similar grassroots movements in other states. The pushback against Betsy DeVos indicates that these movements may be broadening their members’ civic engagement.

**We’ve made phone calls and signed petitions for years, but the most visible tool we have is test refusal.** It is the one thing that has slowed the test-based “accountability” machine (which has not managed to close the alleged\* achievement gap despite decades of testing). The powers that be know this; last year Cuomo and Elia, desperate, made robo calls and commercials to persuade people to opt in. Nevertheless, nearly 1/4 MILLION still refused. We must keep throwing sand in the gears so that our politicians listen. The tests are still too long and still developmentally inappropriate. They are still high stakes despite the moratorium; schools can be sent into receivership based on their test scores. (And the moratorium itself is set to expire soon.) Curriculum is still constricted as long as the tests hold sway, pushing out the high-engagement, hands-on teaching and learning that both students and teachers enjoy and grow from.

Keep opting out in growing numbers and maybe we will force those changes and more!

\*Many would argue that the achievement gap (the disparity in achievement, as measured in test scores, between low-income black and Latino students and others) is more accurately defined as an *opportunity gap*. That is, these students don’t have the same starting point as others because their schools are underfunded and under-resourced.