

## State-Mandated Testing: Why We Opt Out

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By Catherine Ross Hamel & Fred L. Hamel

When district- or state-mandated testing comes around in our children's public schools, we opt out. We inform our kids' teachers and principal in writing that we do not want our children taking the tests. Each year, for the past six years, our requests have been respectfully accommodated.

This isn't a decision we make lightly. Schools have important work to do in the area of reform: to better challenge and engage all children. But when it comes to testing mandates, we exercise our rights as parents to protect our children from activities not in their interests. In our view, such tests diminish the work of teaching and ask children to carry the burden of building public confidence in schools.

The purpose of mandated tests is to provide a snapshot of student performance in a way that informs school decision makers, parents, and community members. These groups need a way to determine what students know and how well schools work in order to make knowledgeable decisions. Our belief, however, is that any decision based solely on the results of a mandated test, even a well-designed test with proven reliability, is a poorly informed decision. The snapshot of learning that comes from such tests is too incomplete a picture. It's a moment in time, a shot taken from a single, distant angle.

We think it's imperative to have a more complete understanding— for the picture to contain multiple perspectives over time, that it be well-focused, true to color, and capable of both wide-angle view and close-up detail. We don't want decisions about what is taught, how schools perform, how to support students, or which kids graduate to be made from anything less than that.

A high-stakes testing environment, we have seen repeatedly, generates an unproductive tension for teachers, tension between what they know about their students and what they must do for the sake of the test. Teachers may feel pressure to cover material quickly, or earlier, to fit the testing schedule, rather than a developmental sequence. Innovative units are reduced, or come to an end, so that test preparation can begin. Families are encouraged to make sure their kids "eat well" and "get a good night's sleep" before testing days (what about learning days?).

These are well-intended efforts. But as schools carry out their mandated testing, they are forced to shift their energies away from what educators know about kids and learning and toward representing themselves in simplistic ways for public consumption. We believe, further, that many

adults working in schools recognize this oversimplification. But they're in a difficult place to object. Such objections must come from outside the schools.

Typically, we submit a letter to the school that reads something like this:

We would like to request that our child not participate in the Washington Assessment of Student Learning testing this spring. We understand that the district is mandated to collect such test data. However, we prefer that our daughter be engaged in learning activities during testing times.

We've discussed our decision with our daughter and her teachers, and we are working together to develop a plan for her during testing times that will work for everyone.

Thank you for considering our request. We appreciate the positive and rich learning environment that you help create and support at [our school].

In our letter, we support those who educate our children, affirming that we trust what they know about students more than what a company-scored test can reveal. During Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and WASL testing in recent years, our kids' teachers have allowed them to work on meaningful alternative activities— activities we believe are more geared to their learning needs. Last year, during mandated testing, our son worked on a story he's been writing avidly about two parakeets like the ones he has at home. In 4th grade, a testing year in our state, our daughter did an independent project about sea animals.

Many argue that mandated tests are a step in the right direction. They move instruction to a higher level, motivate students, and encourage complex problem- solving skills. We see some evidence of this, but we aren't encouraged. The collateral costs are simply too high. In our state, the WASL's ability to effect change in schools comes from the power it has, even as a criterion- referenced test, to cast students as winners and losers. We do not want our children cast in either role.

Winners receive the unproductive message that learning is about making the cut. They are applauded precisely because the standard is set so high—in other words, high enough to ensure that there will be losers. And losers are designated as substandard. The reform process is properly invested in students who need more motivation, support, and challenge. But there are others in this losing group already motivated for school, well-taught, and learning in a manner consistent with their abilities and needs. Here, the rhetoric of test- based reform omits a disturbing reality: Its gains come at the painful expense of such students—that is, those responding to school appropriately but now designated as inadequate. To subject any learner to such collateral costs, and to ignore, minimize, or sugarcoat the effects, is, in our view, a misuse of administrative power.

We are not against standards. We support the kinds of student assessment needed to make sound educational decisions within a classroom. We believe every child can be challenged to exceed his or her own expectations. We are compelled to speak out, however, when parents and community members are led to believe that the best way to address these issues is for children to prepare for and complete hours of mandated testing. Our job as parents, as we see it, is to insist that community leaders respond thoughtfully to failures and dilemmas in schools—in ways that avoid oversimplification. We withdraw our support from practices that expect children to pay the price for improving public confidence in schools. That's why we opt out—to preserve the best of what public schools have to offer our kids.

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