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## Family Experiences with Standardized Assessments Leading to Participation in the Opt Out Movement

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Christy Lee Evans entitled "Family Experiences with Standardized Assessments Leading to Participation in the Opt Out Movement." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Teacher Education.

Colleen P. Gilrane, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Richard L. Allington, Robert Nobles II, Stergios Botzakis

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

**Family Experiences with Standardized Assessments  
Leading to Participation in the Opt Out Movement**

A Dissertation Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Christy Lee Evans  
December 2016

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the two most important people in my life, John Evans and Chance Brogdon. Thank you so much for your unending love and support when I have struggled to believe in myself. Thank you for helping with various assignments throughout the years and being guinea pigs when I needed assistance. Thank you for all of the days waiting for me on campus and helping make presentation materials. Thank you for participating in mock interviews and Jeffersonian transcription exercises. Thank you for keeping me from throwing out my non-Apple products when they refused to work the way they were designed. Thank you for wiping away my tears and encouraging me to simply do my best. Most of all, thank you for your sacrifices. Along with my student loan payments, our next chapter begins now.

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## Abstract

With the hope of giving voice to individuals who are usually left out of conversations regarding standardized assessments—the families who live with the effects of those tests on their children—this study was designed to answer the following research questions:

- 1) Who are some of the individuals who are participating in the opt out movement?
- 2) How are some individuals making the decision to participate in the opt out movement?
  - a) What knowledge do these individuals who are participating in the opt out movement have regarding the standardized assessments that their children are being given in public schools?
  - b) How have these individuals who are participating in the opt out movement been affected by the standardized assessments being given in public schools?

Guided by interpretivist theory's notion that reality is socially-constructed, I strove to better understanding the lived experiences of these individuals. The study's initial phase was a national level census survey with open-ended responses and demographic questions. Eight descriptive interviews were conducted with selected census participants.

Although each interview participant had their own experiences with standardized assessments and the opt out movement, it is striking how much their narratives resonated with each other and the predominant findings in the Census. The following conclusions can be drawn about parent's perspectives from this study's findings:

- Too much testing is going on in American schools,
- Testing is having negative effects on teachers and children,

- Schools and systems are not well-prepared to respond to families who wish to opt out, and
- Parents support their own teachers and/or schools, even when they believe education in general is on the wrong track.

This research has implications for families, for schools, for opt out leaders, and for state education departments and policy makers. It points to the need for additional research regarding test anxiety in children, RTI effects on the well-being of children, in-depth case studies of individual states, and the effects of the opt out movement on reading.



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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Teachers, students, and parents are facing mandates that are changing the curriculum being taught, the assessment measures used to assess achievement for the new curriculum, and the accountability tied to those assessments. Teachers can have their pay decreased or lose their jobs. Students can be placed in remediation classes or be retained based on their performance. Parents are caught in the middle of supporting their child's teacher and watching out for the well-being of their children.

The U. S. Congress reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. NCLB increased the accountability for low performing schools and focused attention on the achievement gaps between white and minority students; high and low socioeconomic students; special education students; and English language learners (Kawaii, Serriere, & Mitra, 2014, p. 487). The accountability came in the form of mandated standardized assessments in reading, mathematics, and science tied to annual yearly progress measures. At the time, an opponent of standardized assessments spoke out by saying, "Standardized testing has swelled and mutated like a creature in one of those old horror movies, to the point that it now threatens to swallow our schools whole" (Kohn, 2000, p. 46). Testing has continued to increase in schools across the country.

As NCLB came up for reauthorization in 2007, it was clear the gains that were hoped for in closing the achievement gaps were not being made. In 2009, the U.S. Department of Education encouraged states to apply for Race to the Top (RTTT) grants, which could assist states in closing their achievement gaps through the adoption of

rigorous standards, tougher assessments, and teacher evaluations (U.S. DOE, RTTT). The grant applications were judged based on different elements and awarded points for such things as developing and implementing common, high-quality assessments; ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools; and improving teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance evaluations (Spring, 2014, p. 1-2). RTTT led to states adopting the controversial Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and joining one of the CCSS-aligned assessment consortiums, such as the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) or the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) standardized assessments.

As Berliner and Glass (2014) stated, “No one wants to diminish teachers’ responsibility for classroom achievement, but they are not alone in producing those effects, and to hold them solely responsible for those effects is unfair” (p. 50). Teacher and parental feedback was not sought in developing the grant applications. Teacher and parental feedback was not sought in whether they wanted increased accountability or wanted to adopt new standards or new assessments. Student feedback on these issues was not sought either. Those debating these issues still are not representing the lived experiences or the wishes of those affected by the mandates. However, those for whom classroom visits are occasional photo opportunities are most likely to be big fans of testing and to offer self-congratulatory sound bites about the need for “tougher standards” and “accountability” (Kohn, 2001, p. 350).

As states moved forward with their adoption of the standards and began implementation of the new assessments, an increasing number of parents and teachers



began to express concern about the instruction required to teach the new standards and the litany of assessments being administered to students. In response to these growing concerns, a grassroots movement is taking hold that involves teachers and parents opting out of standardized testing (Kawaii et al., 2014, p. 488). The opt out movement has grown to the point that it is forcing the public to pay attention to what is happening in public schools across the country (Jones, 2015, blog).

In the name of accountability, schools are being forced to give a litany of assessments and participate in data mining of student information. Through observations of students in an area school, it is evident children are experiencing high levels of anxiety in response to the pressure they are feeling from the mandated assessments being given to them. It is my interest as a researcher to “work with informants to co-construct understandings that are reported as interpretations or narratives” (Hatch, 2002, p. 23). This study was designed to explore the effects of standardized assessments on families, how some families view the accountability movement, and begin to describe who has chosen to participate in the opt out movement spreading across the country.

As educators, we need to better understand how the standardized assessments being given in today’s classrooms are affecting individuals and why some people are interested in opting their children out of mandated assessments. There is little known about who these individuals are or why they have chosen to participate. My hope was to listen to the stories of parents with regard to their family’s lived experiences with standardized assessments, and to gain an understanding of why some of these individuals have opted out of standardized assessments.

A census survey was posted on social media websites and emailed to relevant individuals seeking demographic information and background experiences with testing in order to sketch a picture of individuals who are involved in the opt out movement. The final screen of the census survey recruited participants who were willing to be interviewed regarding their lived experiences with standardized assessments and their participation in the opt out movement.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The extant research (Berliner & Glass, 2014; Bily, 2011; Spring, 2014) looks at standardized assessments from the view of researchers and invested policymakers at the political and research levels. There appears to be a gap in the available research with regard to standardized assessments from the qualitative perspective of teachers, parents, their children, and the opt out movement. I proposed to study how some parents view the tests their children are taking in K-12 school settings; learn how these participants define standardized assessment; and describe the impacts of standardized assessments on the children's emotional and physical well-being that may have led them to participate in the opt out movement. The ultimate objective for this study was to provide a face to some of the individuals who are behind the testing data that is being used to create mandates in public education or that is being used to influence public opinion regarding the opt out movement. I explored the following research questions:

1. Who are some of the individuals who are participating in the opt out movement?

2. How are some individuals making the decision to participate in the opt out movement?
  - a. What knowledge do these individuals who are participating in the opt out movement have regarding the standardized assessments that their children are being given in public schools?
  - b. How have these individuals who are participating in the opt out movement been affected by the standardized assessments being given in public schools?

### **Significance of the Study**

The findings from the study serve to provide a voice for individuals who are generally left out of the conversation regarding standardized assessments: the families who live with the effects of those tests on their children. As members of online communities dedicated to the dissemination of information on opting out of the standardized assessments being given in the classroom, some of the participants have already established lines of communication to express their concerns and experiences in these areas. My goal in this study was to work to provide some participants with a research platform to get their opinions, experiences, and needs into the larger research conversation and possibly into the federal and state political conversations regarding standardized assessments. This knowledge could help lead to more informed choices regarding the implementation of standardized assessment mandates and aid state decisions regarding parental rights to opt their children out of standardized assessments.

As researchers and educators, we attempt to examine the experiences of participants and how they relate to a larger context. Although this study is not aimed at generalizing to a particular group, it is intended to provide a voice for individuals who have been affected by standardized assessments in education settings. By conducting a study on the lived experiences of participants and how assessments affect students, I hoped in this study to examine individuals across communities using social media and online resources. This study provides additional insight into parental perception and feelings regarding the standardized assessments being given to their children. The findings should be relevant to members of the education and political communities who seek to listen to missing voices in the education conversation concerning standardized assessments. “The bottom line is that standardized testing can continue only with the consent and cooperation of the educators who allow the tests to be distributed in their schools-and of the parents who permit their children to take them” (Kohn, 2001, p. 355). The voices of some of these individuals need to be heard and to be part of the research conversation.

### **Limitations & Assumptions**

#### **Limitations**

The participants in this study are parents and other individuals concerned for one reason or another about the testing currently being done in K-12 schools. At the onset of the research, it was unknown if the participant pool would be comprised of a heterogeneous group of people or of individuals with more social capital or a disposition geared towards participating in activism. Participants from lower socioeconomic status

backgrounds may not have had the computer access or education needed to participate in the study. As Fowler (2014) states,

The computer skills, the reading and writing skills of the population, and their motivation to cooperate are salient considerations in choosing a mode of data collection... Respondents who are not very well educated, whose reading and writing skills in English are less than facile (but who can speak English), people who do not see well, people who do not use computers very much, and people who are somewhat ill or tire easily all will find an interviewer-administered survey easier than filling out a self-administered form (p. 63).

Another potential limitation was the unknown quality of some of the potential documents to be included. Willing interview participants were asked to share any documents that they believe might add depth and understanding to their stories. As Merriam (1998) stated, “Because documents are not produced for research purposes, the information they offer may not be in the form that is useful (or understandable) to the investigator” and the documents’ authenticity and accuracy could be hard to determine (p. 124-125). In that case, participants would have been contacted to participate in follow-up interviews to address any potential misunderstandings or gaps that may have appeared in the interview transcript or documents provided for analysis.

Another possible limitation of self-administered approaches is getting people to complete a questionnaire on their own. Only respondents with an increased level of engagement in the phenomenon being studied may have the self-motivation to complete the survey by themselves (Fowler, 2014). Additionally, the demographic census survey

was designed to be shared via email to individuals known to be involved in the opt out movement and as posts on social media sites directly related to education and individuals interested in testing reform efforts.

Finally, a limitation to the study was my positionality as the researcher. It is expected in qualitative research for the researcher to be involved in each level of the data analysis. However, my roles of mother and teacher have given me previous experiences with standardized assessments, which may have potentially influenced the interpretation of the data. I took care throughout each phase of the study to be aware of this lens and reflect continually throughout the research process on this influence.

### **Delimitations**

Initial contact for census survey respondents was made via (1) social media opt out pages, and (2) email correspondence with individuals recognized as leaders in the opt out movement. As such, it was hard to determine at the onset of the study what the actual number was for the pool of census survey respondents. There was also no way to determine at the onset of the study what potential individuals could be excluded from participation in the study.

The timeline for data collection and data analysis may have factored into the number of responses to the census survey and the number of individuals willing to be interviewed. It also may have been a factor into the types of documents participants had access as the predominant testing window in some states does not begin until later in the spring than the period for the data collection. In a previous study of participants of the opt out movement (Evans, 2015), the observation was that participants were more active in

the social media group during testing windows, especially in regards to their family's experiences with the standardized assessments given to their children and their wish for alternative assessment measures. If testing windows and group activity in other states resemble the previous study, the timeline for the data collection window in this study may have influenced the results or rate of participation.

### **Assumptions**

As a qualitative researcher with an interest in the phenomenon of the opt out and accountability movements that has taken ground in K-12 public schools across the United States, I began this study with several assumptions. First, I assumed that individuals interested in participating in the opt out movement were doing so because of the effects of standardized testing on their children. Second, I assumed that individuals participating in the opt out movement via social media groups would be interested in sharing their stories and the effects of standardized assessments on their families. Finally, I assumed I would be able to paint portraits of individuals who were participating in the opt out movement that were more diverse than the picture that Arne Duncan, former Secretary of Education, tried to paint of individuals who were opposed to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) when he referred to them as 'white suburban moms that were upset that their children weren't as brilliant as they thought they were (Strauss, 2013).

### **Reflexivity Statement**

As Dutro & Selland (2012) explained, "Once a person ascribes to a particular position as his or her own, that person begins to see the world in terms of the storylines that are made available and relevant within the discursive practices in which they are

positioned” (p. 342-343). I am currently a K-2 English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher and Literacy Teacher Partner for students and teachers in the primary grades. Before this year, I was a K-4 ESL teacher in the same system and was named the 2014 TNTESOL East Tennessee Teacher of the Year. I have a record of great teaching evaluations. Although I would never have listed testing as something that I loved about my job, it was not until midway through my teaching career that I became aware of the negative effects of these assessments on children and became opposed to standardized testing.

During the 2012-2013 school year, I was required to administer a record number (at least for my career) of assessments to my ESL students. The assessments given to my 4<sup>th</sup> grade ESL students that year were both state and district mandated. These assessments included STAR Reading; STAR Math; Discovery Education Assessments (DEA) for Science, Social Studies, Math, and English Language Arts; Constructed Response Assessment (CRA) for Math; TCAP Writing; TCAP/ELSA Achievement; English Language Development Assessment (ELDA); and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). These standardized assessments were administered according to requirements included in federal mandates aimed at providing insight into how students are academically progressing in American schools and meeting the progress monitoring requirements of Response to Intervention (RTI) regulations. As a teacher, I watched children break down over the stress of weekly progress monitoring. I watched children take standardized assessments without their accustomed language accommodations in unfamiliar settings with unfamiliar proctors. And, I have witnessed



special education children break down in tears and request to call their parents as teachers had to restart computers that failed midway through their exams.

As a fifth grader in another school in my district, my son was required to take a similar number of assessments. Up until that year, he could have been described as a typical middle school boy. He did not mind reading, but it was not his favorite choice of activities. He did not hate school, but he would have preferred being at home or playing video games with his friends. All of his feelings toward school and reading changed with the testing that was expected of him that year and how some of his teachers and school staff chose to handle it. His grade level teachers posted all student results from these assessments in the school hallways. The teachers did not post them by student name, but divided them into proficiency groups by personal identification number. The proficiency groups were: Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, and Advanced. His teachers kept reminding the students their grades would be affected and the teachers' effectiveness would be determined by the student's performance on these tests.

By the spring semester, my son was so overwhelmed and stressed by all of the focus on testing he began twisting and pulling on his hair when he became anxious. During his school's end-of-the-year benchmarking with the DEA and STAR Reading/Math tests, he became so anxious he pulled out a 1x2 inch bald spot on the top of his head in less than a few days. His stepfather and I took him to the pediatrician and he shared the same thoughts and feelings with her as he had with us. He was diagnosed with trichotillomania, which is "a disorder that involves the repetitive pulling of one's own hair to the point of noticeable hair loss" (Franklin, Flessner, Woods, Keuthen,

Placentini, Moore, Stein, Cohen, Wilson, & Board, 2008, p. 493). Although my son's case was limited to just one hair pulling site, more than half of the children suffering from trichotillomania in a study by Franklin et al. repetitively pulled hair from more than one site. My son continued to work with a counselor on test anxiety strategies and was prompted to use cognitive-behavioral therapy techniques, such as the use of fidget toys (Trichotillomania Learning Center, 2007) when he experiences feelings of anxiety in school testing situations. His fidget toys were small items that he could play with discreetly during situations in which he felt compelled to pull on his hair that did not attract more attention to him and that his teachers or family members could prompt him to use when he exhibited signs of anxiety. His fidgets included a nut and bolt topper for his pencil, a stress ball, color changing putty, and a zipper bracelet.

During a course I took at The University of Tennessee, *Politics in Reading Education*, Dr. Richard Allington shared that parents in Seattle were resisting the testing mandates occurring in their children's schools. They were choosing to 'opt them out' of standardized assessments. I learned the ramifications of such a decision could be the receiving of failing grades, being retained in grade level, and/or forfeiting entrance into special academic programs. I also learned there were ramifications the school could face, such as loss of federal funding if 95% of students were not tested.

In my qualitative research courses, I have learned the importance of different identities in the role of the researcher in qualitative studies. Qualitative research and analysis is an interpretive process shaped by the subjects' and researchers' personal experiences, age, gender, race/ethnicity, social class, and biases (Warden & Wong, 2007).

Identities are important in terms of the researcher and in the participants. For me, as a graduate student, my roles as a teacher and a parent have come in conflict regarding the testing practices that are happening in public schools, and it has led me to want to connect with others in order to understand their attitudes toward the assessments their children have to take in public education. Therefore, as I entered into a previous study analyzing Facebook posts made by individuals in an Opt Out Facebook group, I assumed individuals would be involved for similar reasons I had encountered as a parent or as a teacher. I learned the participants in that study were predominantly choosing to participate in the opt out movement due to frustrations with how their children's school placed students in special academic programs, such as classes for gifted and talented students. As I began this study, I hoped that in addition to reasons that had already been encountered by me and shared by previous participants that new reasons for participation in the opt out movement would be learned throughout the course of study.

### **Definition of Terms**

In addition to key research terms that define the methodology and analysis within the study, there are several key terms or phrases related to standardized assessment and the opt out movement that could mean different things to different perspectives:

**Accountability:** In response to mandates, such as NCLB and Race to the Top, the results from standardized assessments are increasingly being used for high stakes means.

Schools, districts, and states continually use the results of these assessments to determine teacher effectiveness, evaluate the quality of instruction, and provide funding for low

performing schools. The data from the tests are also used to determine instructional supports, entry into special programs, and grade promotion.

**Alternate Test Options:** Opponents to standardized assessments argue for other authentic methods of assessment to determine what students know and what deficits need to be addressed. Alternate test options also include what activities students are allowed to participate in lieu of testing during state assessment windows.

**Correspondence State Officials:** Parents and school officials communicate regarding questions and concerns with standardized assessments. Documents include blanket mandates issued to schools from state departments of education, letters parents receive informing them of testing windows, and letters parents send to the school requesting that their children do not take such tests.

**Education Reform:** Parents wishing to opt their children out of standardized assessments include in their argument more problems than just issues with specific assessments. They also include areas of public education in which they would like to see change happen, such as the privatization of public education, Response to Intervention (RTI) mandates, the implementation of Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and the local vs. federal government control in educational decisions.

**Effects of Standardized Assessment-Schools:** The implementation of standardized assessments have high stake outcomes for schools, including change in instruction, testing, and funding.

**Effects of Standardized Assessment-Students:** The implementation of standardized assessments have high stake outcomes for students, including negative feelings regarding

test performance and experience, placement in different educational programs, class placement, and grade retention.

**Effects of Standardized Assessment-Teachers:** The implementation of standardized assessments have high stake outcomes for teachers, including merit pay, determination of teacher effectiveness, renewal of teaching licensure, and job retention.

**Opt Out Participation:** Participants gain information on the opt out movement by joining social media groups or local organized efforts. Opt out participation also includes parental decisions to opt their children out of standardized assessments or participating in education advocacy that includes elements related to standardized assessments.

**Opt Out vs. Refusal:** Most states do not have opt out legislation and districts do not recognize parental right to opt their children out of standardized assessments. Parents must choose to refuse testing for their children instead of opting out and/or the child must state to the test proctor they are refusing to complete the test.

**Personal Experience:** One of the primary reasons there is a need for this research is that parents and student voices appear to be missing from the research conversation regarding high stakes testing and the opt out movement. As previous literature reviews have shown and studies included in the literature review for this study, the research in this area has predominantly used quantitative methods in which individual experiences are reduced to responses on questionnaires or observational tallies. In this study, participant experiences are included regarding their own experiences with standardized testing, their children's experiences with standardized assessments, and their interactions with others regarding the best decisions for their children.

## **Methodological Theory**

As Glesne (2011) describes it, “A paradigm is a framework or philosophy of science that makes assumptions about the nature of reality and truth, the kinds of questions to explore, and how to go about doing so” (p. 5). I believe my framework is most consistent with the views of the interpretivist traditions. “Interpretivist traditions portray a world in which reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever changing. What is of importance to know, then, is how people interpret and make meaning of some object, event, action, perception, etc.” (Glesne, 2011, p. 8). “Interpretive research assumes that reality is socially constructed, that is, there is no single, observable reality. Rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event. Constructivism is a term often used interchangeably with interpretivism” (Merriam, 2009, p. 8). As Hatch (2002) explains it, a constructivist believes there are multiple realities co-constructed between the researcher and the participant (p. 13). He also pointed out these views are most in line with qualitative research methods. Merriam also agrees with this view and states, “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5).

The theoretical framework is what “guides how researchers come to know what they know. The methodological framework includes assumptions about what is of importance to study, what constitutes legitimate knowledge, and what counts as evidence for making knowledge claims” (Glesne, 2011, p. 282). I was interested in investigating *how my participants view the standardized assessments their children are expected to*

*take in school and why they have decided to participate in the opt out movement.* I believe participants were drawn to this movement because of personal experiences and I wanted to develop an understanding of what those experiences were. I also believe there are effects of testing that influenced the decisions participants made based on their lived experiences. It was my hope to work with participants to gain a better understanding of their lived experiences with standardized assessments and describe some of the individuals who are participating in the opt out movement.

Based on my interest in working with participants in the opt out movement, I chose to begin by collecting descriptive data via a census survey. The web-based survey was posted on opt out social media sites, as well as emailed to leaders in the opt out movement for them to forward to any individuals whom they knew were participating in the opt out movement. I was interested in conducting descriptive interviews with selected census participants. According to Merriam (2009), “Data are collected through interviews, observations, or document analysis” (p. 23). I believed descriptive interview research, in addition to their shared artifacts used as needed to support the stories they told, was the best method for gaining a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of individuals and a glimpse of the movement that they are constructing together on a national level.

### **Organization of the Study**

In this chapter, I introduced the significance of my study and background related to individuals choosing to participate in the opt out movement. I included an introduction to the problem; the purpose of the study; my research questions; the definitions of

important terms; a reflexivity statement showcasing my connection with the research focus; and any theoretical assumptions. Next, I present a comprehensive review of relevant research in this area as the basis for my study in chapter two. This review includes information regarding the legislation involved in the mandate of standardized testing, effects standardized assessments have previously had on individuals involved in testing, and a brief history of the opt out movement. In chapter three, I detail the research design, data collection, and data analysis for this study. In chapter four, I discuss the findings of the census survey portion of the study. In chapter five, I share the narratives of the interview participants. In chapter six, I discuss the findings and offer implications of this study for individuals involved in education decision making, such as politicians, educators, opt out leaders, and parents. I also offer recommendations for other areas of research as indicated by the findings in this study.



## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

In this study, I proposed to study how some parents view the tests their children are taking in K-12 school settings; learn how these participants define standardized assessment; and describe the impacts of standardized assessments on the children's emotional and physical well-being that may have led them to participate in the opt out movement. The main objective for this study was to provide a face to some of the individuals who are behind the testing data that is being used to create mandates in public education or that is being used to influence public opinion regarding the opt out movement.

In this chapter, a review of the federal laws governing standardized assessments given in K-12 schools is provided, which includes No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Next, information is shared on assessments given in K-12 schools in the name of accountability. This information includes the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) aligned assessments Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), as well as controversy surrounding the use of these assessments, Questar, and an example of a state developed assessment alternative. Information is also shared regarding the large scale assessments National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) and Program for International Assessment (PISA). Then, a discussion is provided of the effects standardized assessments have on children and factors affecting testing anxiety in some children. Finally, issues in standardized assessments that are discussed within the opt out

movement are shared in the context of individuals who have been participating in the opt out movement.

In 2000, Gallagher wrote an article for *The Phi Delta Kappan* about ‘teachers reclaiming assessment through accountability’. In the article he wrote,

Although standardized tests came under intense fire for a short time in the 1970’s, we have returned to this practice with a fervor perhaps greater than at any other time since schools in the United States began making extensive use of standardized tests in the 1930’s (p. 502).

To that, the hands of time need to be reset in order for school children across the country to say to him, “You haven’t seen nothing yet!” Children sitting in today’s classrooms face a formidable number of assessments, including universal screeners, benchmarking tests, intervention progress monitoring, formative assessments, and a multitude of state mandated standardized assessments.

In 2012, President Barack Obama launched the Race to the Top (RTTT) initiative that awarded over \$4 billion dollars to states (Spring, 2014, p. 2). In order to be considered, states had to submit a grant application, which was evaluated based on four areas of education reform. Those reform areas included the adoption of rigorous standards and assessments; the adoption of a data system in order to share student progress and improve instruction based on student need; the development and training of effective teachers and school leaders with rewards being awarded for effectiveness, and the use of targeted interventions and resources for the state’s lowest-performing schools (U.S. Department of Education, Race to the Top, 2015). It is the "implementation of

rigorous standards and assessments" that seems to be causing high levels of contention among parents and education departments across the country, and has led parents to opt their children out of standardized testing in reading and/or math.

In 2004, Braden and Schroeder wrote about the unintended consequences schools and individuals faced when they worked with the high-stakes tests required of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. Specifically, the researchers discussed the narrowing of the curriculum as teachers felt pressure to teach to the test and the cheating that can happen as a result of standardized testing mandates, such as tying test scores to teacher evaluations and differentiated pay scales (p. 75). Perreault wrote about the impact of high-stakes testing even earlier in 2000. Teachers in the study discussed the concern they felt over feeling the need to teach to the test, expressed feelings of defeat in being able to help students succeed, and the pressure they felt administration placed on them to raise test scores (p. 707-708).

### **Federal Laws Governing Standardized Testing**

There are several federal laws governing student participation in statewide assessments in public schools across the United States and what the testing entails. These federal laws include the newly reauthorized NCLB Act of 2001 known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (reauthorized in 2008).

## **No Child Left Behind Act of 2001**

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) into law (Arce, Luna, Borjian, & Contrad, 2005, p. 56). Both Democrats and Republicans sponsored amendments to be made to ESEA and it was reauthorized by President George W. Bush under its new name the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (Spring, 2014, p. 4). ESEA was designed with the purpose of providing additional funds for schools serving low-income students, providing funds to schools in order to help purchase books and textbooks and in providing funding for professional development for teachers (U.S. Department of Education, ESEA, p. 1; Spelling, 2005, p. 3). The Title I provision of ESEA is the section of law that requires testing and pushes for increased accountability (Valencia & Wixson, 1999, p. 8).

NCLB was designed in the hopes of closing achievement gaps in the United States and was enacted by the 107<sup>th</sup> United States Congress during the 2003-2004 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Its stated purpose was to work on “Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged” (Spring, 2014, p. 4). On the national level, NCLB is the national legislative driving force being used to push schools, districts, and states to test children and is the rationale for why parents choosing to opt their children out of testing would hurt the schools they attend. NCLB identifies key subgroups, such as race/ethnicity, poverty, gender, disability, and English proficiency, that schools are required to track their progress and make sure at least 95% of students are being tested in each subgroup (Braden & Schroeder, 2004). However, according to Berliner, NCLB has not produced any “changes in the achievement gap

between poor and wealthy students, and gains on achievement tests are small, even after extensive time has been allocated in schools across the nation for direct preparation for the tests” (2014, p. 58).

Specifically, it is the Title I provision of NCLB that mandates states must have a participation rate of no less than 95% of the students on standardized assessments in their schools that receive Title I funds or else the school will be in “noncompliance”, which could result in the loss of federal funds (p. 12). NCLB did allow the provision that this 95% goal could be an average over a three-year period in order to ensure considerations would be taken into account for unforeseen circumstances, such as natural disasters or illnesses to determine if the school met the 95% participation goal. NCLB required that states (a) assessed students in grades 3-8 and once during grades 10-12 in reading and math using state-designed assessments; (b) assessed students in science once during grades 3-5, 6-9, and 10-12 using state-designed assessments; and (c) accepted nothing short of 100 percent student proficiency by 2014 on such assessments (Boehner, 2004, p. 8; Brown, 2015). According to the NCLB guide, the rationale for the 100 percent proficient goal by 2014 was any goal set lower would essentially be saying it is okay to leave some children behind (p. 11). As NCLB was written, schools failing to meet the requirements were required to take corrective action after two consecutive years and could have faced restructuring and the loss of federal funds (Braden & Schroeder, 2004).

Although NCLB mandated all states reach 100 percent proficiency by 2014, it did allow states to determine their own bar for what the cut off score for student level of proficiency would be (Brown, 2015). However, special education and limited English

proficient (LEP) students were also included in the state's 100 percent proficient expectations (p. 25). As 2014 has come and gone, 100 percent of students have yet to be identified as proficient in any state. The U.S. Department of Education granted 43 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico waivers for failing to meet this requirement of NCLB. In exchange for the waiver, states had to develop plans to address how they would (a) improve the educational outcomes for all students; (b) close the achievement gaps of subgroups; (c) increase equity; and (d) improve the quality of instruction provided to its students (U.S. Department of Education, ESEA Flexibility, 2015).

Although NCLB is often referenced in today's accountability movement, a 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* provided the trajectory for the path education reform and accountability mandates are on (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000, p. 384). This report called for tougher standards with an increased need to assess student progress towards meeting those standards. Just prior to NCLB, Gallagher noted "the persistence of the crisis in education" could be equated to the profit margin of the testing companies (p. 503). NCLB had the stated purpose of wanting to help those most in need of academic support, such as the economically disadvantaged and those with limited English proficiency, but first those children had to be identified. NCLB provided funding for states to design assessments and funding needed to administer the assessments.

According to fiscal year 2014, over \$14 billion was allocated to the Title I provision of NCLB, which provided funds to serve economically disadvantaged students. That equated to a reported \$378 million being designated specifically for state assessments (U.S. Department of Education, Education Budget, 2015).

In addition to the Title I provision of NCLB, the act addressed the needs of America's limited English proficient students with its Title III program. This program required that states adopt accountability for all students in order to ensure all limited English proficient students had access to programs providing strong academic and language development support. It required annual assessments for determining progress in meeting academic and language proficiency standards be administered (Title III- Language Instruction for Limited English Proficient and Immigrant Students, 20 U.S.C. 6801 et seq. 2002).

Although NCLB expired in 2007 and failed to be reauthorized several times, the mandates and repercussions for schools failing to meet annual yearly progress remained in effect (Brown & Layton, 2015, Washington Post). The 2015 reauthorization of ESEA was a bill sponsored by Tennessee Senator Lamar Alexander. According to an email from Senator Alexander (personal communication June 15, 2015), one of the main issues in the reauthorization was it needed to include components working to give responsibility back to states, school districts, classroom teachers, and parents in "deciding what to do about improving students' achievement." He also noted the reauthorization needed to address the decisions to tie teacher evaluations to student standardized test scores and whether the states wanted to continue with the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). At the time, he acknowledged the biggest area of concern being expressed to him was standardized testing and how the federal government's push for accountability has led to the "exploding number of state and federal tests" being given to students in American classrooms. Although the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 still

includes the 95% testing provision of NCLB that mandates the number of students participating in the state's standardized testing, it also includes amendments which would allow states the option to provide parents' greater ability to opt their children out of standardized assessments without the state's Departments of Education facing penalty from the U.S. Department of Education.

### **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004**

President George W. Bush signed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) into law on December 3, 2004. The majority of IDEA's \$12.50 billion budget goes to Part B with \$11.47 billion, which is still considered by most to be underfunded (U.S. Department of Education, Education Budget Tables, 2014). IDEA determined states must set performance goals and indicators for students with disabilities, including outlining the objectives for what determines if the state has made adequate yearly progress (AYP) for students with disabilities. It added graduation rates and dropout rates that are consistent for all students in the state regardless of disability (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, p. 4). IDEA also requires states to develop alternative assessments for students with disabilities aligned with the state's academic standards (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, p. 5; U.S. Department of Education, [IDEA], 2004).

### **Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973**

According to the Office of Civil Rights, "Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a national law that protects qualified individuals from discrimination based on their disability" (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, p. 1). It requires



school districts to provide qualified students who have a disability with a free public education appropriate for their needs no matter what the nature of the disability is or how severe the disability maybe (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, Section 2). “Section 504 covers qualified students with disabilities who attend schools receiving Federal financial assistance” (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, Section 4). The Office of Civil Rights determines that providing “an appropriate education” could involve supplementary services, special education services or attending class in the general education setting (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, Section 3). However, funds allocated for special education budgets cannot be used to pay for services for a student with a Section 504 plan even if services through a special education department are deemed appropriate for the student. A student qualifying for protection under Section 504 must: (a) have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity; (b) have a record of such impairment; or (c) be regarded as having such an impairment (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, Section 4). The physical or mental impairment could include a physiological disorder, cosmetic disfigurement, anatomical loss, mental retardation, emotional or mental illness, or specific learning disabilities. A student’s 504 plan provides an outline for the accommodations students may have on standardized assessments according to their disability as monitored by the Office of Civil Rights. Unlike its IDEA counterpart, Section 504 is not federally funded and therefore state and local districts must incur the cost of providing services for these students.

## **Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Aligned Assessments**

As states adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and completed grant applications for Race to the Top (RTTT) funds, they also needed assessments aligned with those standards. The United States Department of Education awarded \$330 million of RTTT funds to two companies to develop CCSS-aligned assessments (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The two big testing companies that developed assessments for the CCSS were the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). Questar is another test adopted by a few states, such as Minnesota and New York, that have chosen to opt out of SBAC and PARCC assessments.

### **Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium**

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) worked to develop “a system of valid, reliable, and fair next-generation assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English language arts/literacy (ELA/literacy) and mathematics for grades 3-8 and grade 11” (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, 2011). It is a computer-based assessment. When states received their grant award from the United States Department of Education, there were 31 states in the SBAC consortium. According to Marachi (2015), there were many problems reported with SBAC testing. Observers did not feel the assessment accurately measured what they were intended to assess and students experienced too much difficulty in answering the questions given the format of the test. Other issues included the age appropriateness of the computer-based assessment; lack of teacher and student training in working with the computer software;

and the feelings of frustration students exhibited during testing. To date, the SBAC webpage still lists 15 member states mostly in northwestern United States, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Bureau of Indian Education.

### **Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers**

According to the Pearson website, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), developed assessments to help track whether students would be successful in college or in their careers. The PARCC assessment is a computer-based assessment of students in grades K-12 in the areas of English language arts and mathematics (PARCC, 2014). In 2011, 24 states were members of the PARCC consortium, as well as the District of Columbia (Schneider, 2014). During the 2013-2014 school year, the state of Tennessee participated in PARCC field testing (PARCC, 2014). The test had quite a lengthy administration time. According to the Spring 2015 Administration Update, an average 3<sup>rd</sup> grade student would take 8 units (known elsewhere as testing sessions) in English language arts and mathematics for a total administration time of 585 minutes.

Later in the spring of that year, state legislators in Tennessee responded to their constituents who were expressing concern over the further use of the online assessment based on issues that arose during the field-testing window. These issues included computer glitches, such as the one that occurred in one East Tennessee school that resulted in special education students to be forced to redo their work after the test platform froze mid-test. The state legislators voted to delay further PARCC implementation and began the bidding process to adopt another assessment. During the

2015-2016 school year, only 11 states and the District of Columbia participated in the administration of PARCC tests. The company has now developed a tiered approach for using their assessment in lieu of full adoption by interested states (PARCC, 2016).

### **Controversy Surrounding CCSS-Aligned Tests**

Since their adoption, controversy has surrounded the CCSS-aligned tests. Opponents point to the need for transparency in how the test is administered, what items are included in the assessments, and how the tests are scored. Assessments, such as SBAC and PARCC, often have high stakes attached to them and people feel educators should have the right to see the tests prior to administration in order to better align curriculum with the assessments.

The push for transparency of the standardized assessments also comes from reports of scoring errors and confusing test questions. Pearson published test items attached to their reading passage called *The Hare and the Pineapple* about a talking pineapple (Brody, 2015). Known as “Pineapplegate”, the questions on the New York State Regents exam were reportedly confusing and did not appear to have a correct answer for test takers to select in the answer choices (Schaeffer, 2012, p. 36).

It was reported that the testing developers hired social media monitors to watch posts on social networking sites during testing windows to ensure test protocols are being followed and sanctions are given to teachers and students who divulge information about the test (Marachi, 2015). These sanctions could include job loss for the teacher or receiving a score of zero on the assessment for the student.

There is the growing opinion that student responses on these high-stakes, CCSS-aligned tests are being evaluated by individuals with only high school equivalency diplomas and were hired based on their response to ads on Craigslist (Ravitch, 2015, Strauss, 2013). In response to the growing number of states choosing to withdraw their alignment with these tests, Pearson has worked to address some of the areas of concern. In spring 2015, the company allowed a reporter to visit one of its scoring facilities to observe how the assessments are graded and who is scoring answer responses (Sanchez, 2015). At the scoring facility in San Antonio, Sanchez learned that according to Pearson's hiring policy, scorers must hold at least a four-year degree and have one year of teaching experience. The scorers are given anchor papers, which were selected by teachers across the United States as examples for grade level expectations, to use as a guide to determine student scores. Pearson's efforts to be more transparent and address concerns of its opponents appear to be too late. Although 45 states originally signed up for SBAC and PARCC, there are only 15 SBAC states and 11 PARCC states remaining in their consortiums (Spring, 2015; Coalition to Protect Our Public Schools, 2015).

### **Questar**

Questar (2015) is a test being adopted by some states to replace their previously adopted CCSS-aligned assessments. According to the Questar company webpage, it is a K-12 assessment that focuses on "accountability and student learning" (<http://www.questarai.com/large-scale-assessment/>). The assessment has both paper and computer versions and has components that provide reports to teachers and schools based on computerized and human score services. In addition to Minnesota and Mississippi,

New York has decided to repeal their membership in the PARCC consortium and have announced their decision to award Questar with a \$44 million contract over five years for its testing of students in grades 3-8 (Campbell, 2015; Brody, 2015). Although this test has just recently entered into the testing conversation, issues have already begun to emerge with its 2015-2016 use. According to Kate Royals with the *Clarion Ledger* (2016, March 16 6:48pm CDT), veteran teachers who previewed practice tests consistently identified issues with question formats and answer choices, but state officials attributed this to the quick turn around of the product for state use as it had just recently been adopted. However, as end of the year testing rolled around, students were frustrated and districts across the state were upset over computer glitches in the assessment program that resulted in delays of up to 20 minutes during test administration (Mannie, 2016, April 28 1:00pm CDT).

### **Example of a State-Developed Assessment Alternative**

As an alternative to the larger CCSS-aligned assessments, several states have chosen to develop their own state assessment programs through partnerships with testing corporations. Tennessee, like many other states, has been in a period of transition for several years. With the decision to adopt CCSS and the aligned PARCC assessment, the state scheduled the end of its assessment through the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) for the end of the 2014-2015 school year (Chalkbeat, 2014). Then, the state's decision to delay further implementation of PARCC and CCSS in Tennessee public schools forced the state's Department of Education to alter its educational plan again.

Instead of adopting another CCSS-aligned assessment, such as Questar, it was decided that beginning in the 2015-2016 school year, students in Tennessee would no longer be expected to take the TCAP Achievement Test at any grade level, no longer be instructed with CCSS, and no longer be assessed with the CCSS-aligned PARCC assessment. The standards were replaced with the rebranded standards for Tennessee known as TNCore, which would be tested with an assessment developed by Measurement, Inc. known as TNReady (TN Department of Education, Assessment, 2014). TNReady was supposed to provide information on whether students were prepared for graduation, college, and/or the workplace. TNReady was also supposed to include both multiple-choice and constructed response items, which involved students citing evidence from the text to justify their answers to the questions. Student grammar was to be assessed in the context of the student's writing.

According to the TN Department of Education website for the 2015-2016 school year, TNReady for grades 3-8 was scheduled to be given two times during the school year, both during the spring semester of the academic calendar. There was reportedly a paper pencil version for districts struggling with technology needs or needing assistance in meeting the needs of students with individualized education plans. According to a representative with Measurement Inc., the TN Department of Education did not request paper and pencil versions for any students from the test developer prior to test windows (Tatter, 2016, April 27 1:06 pm EDT). However, the TN Department of Education did decide to administer paper and pencil versions of the test for all students after major testing glitches occurred as the test first rolled out in spring (Burke, 2016). As the second

testing window approached, the state department made the decision to halt testing in grades 3-8 due to Measurement, Inc.'s inability to deliver test materials to districts in what the state felt was a timely manner (Scott, 2016, April 28 6:44pm EDT).

### **Large Scale Assessments**

In addition to the state created standardized assessments and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)-aligned assessments given annually to students, there are assessments geared to assessing and comparing results across states and countries. These assessments are not given annually to all students, but are given to students at specific grade levels or to students of a certain age. These assessments include the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA).

#### **National Assessment of Education Progress**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) was established in 1969 in order to provide a common benchmark for measuring student progress and to measure the quality of education provided to students across the country. At first, NAEP was “intended to be a descriptive assessment of what children knew and didn’t know” and it tested American students’ science knowledge (National & International Assessments). In 1973, the assessment also began assessing a students’ mathematic ability. NAEP started to be used to compare states in 1988 when Congress amended how NAEP was to be used (Bracey, 2009; Phillips & Finn, 1990, p. 47; National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).



NAEP is known as the “Nation’s Report Card” and was created through the collective efforts of individuals from the government, education, business, and others (Scott, 2004).

One strength of NAEP is that the administration results should be able to show instructional trends over time as it has been administered since the early 1970’s. The same questions are asked in every state and demographic questionnaires are used allowing possible gaps in achievement to be identified. The schools and students participating in the NAEP are carefully selected in order to provide a reflective pool of individuals who represent the demographics of the United States as a whole. On average, 2,500 students are selected in each state. The assessment includes general education, special education, and limited English proficient students.

The NAEP assessment is administered by trained NAEP staff in order to limit the disruption NAEP testing causes to the school and non-participants of the test. The tests are designed to have an administration time of 90 minutes for the paper and pencil version and up to 120 minutes for the computer-based assessment. NAEP is conducted to assess students (and schools) in mathematics, reading, science, writing, the arts, civics, economics, geography, U.S. history, and technology and engineering literacy (TN Department of Education, Assessment, 2014, p. 3; Scott, 2004, NAEP). The test is scheduled every four years.

### **Program for International Student Assessment**

There is an international assessment administered to students in the United States to compare the United States with countries across the globe. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an assessment of reading, mathematics, and

science given every three years since 2000 to 15 year olds (Bracey, 2009; Scott, 2004; PISA). PISA is designed through the collaboration of content experts from the United States and other nations. It does not assess all subject areas in each test administration.

The 2012 PISA administration focused on math, the 2015 PISA assessed students' science knowledge, and the 2018 assessment will be geared toward reading (PISA). PISA has a survey portion, which asks students demographic questions about themselves, and the test asks students to answer open-ended questions related to real-life situations. The PISA has a 2 hour test administration window given to randomly selected students who may be asked to participate in an additional hour of testing on financial literacy (PISA). This assessment is given in 70 countries with 42 students in each school selected to participate, which varies by country as participants are selected based on ability to represent the demographics of the country. Schneider (2009) stated that the administration of PISA costs approximately \$25 million.

The United States typically reports average-below average results on PISA administrations. In the 2012 PISA administration, “The United States ranked 26<sup>th</sup> in math, 21<sup>st</sup> in science and 17<sup>th</sup> in reading” (OECD, 2012). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), this ranks the United States performing average in reading and science and below average in mathematics (2012). However, there are criticisms related to the administration of this international assessment, which suggests this is an invalid comparison. For one, the United States is more diverse in terms of students served in schools than a lot of other countries. Education regulations vary from country to country regarding number of years in

schooling, retention, academic supports, etc. (Bracey, 2009). Therefore a fifteen year old in the United States could have a much different educational experience than a fifteen year old in another country, which can greatly influence their ability to answer the assessment questions effectively. Because PISA tests a student's ability to use knowledge in real-life situations, bias could play a role in student understanding of questions based on the student's background building experiences. Also, the test is created in one language and translated into other languages. Cultural bias could play a role in how students answer the questions and test translation can affect the difficulty of the question.

### **Effects of Testing on Children**

School children across the United States face an ever-increasing number of standardized assessments each school year in response to the push for increased accountability in today's American classrooms (Lowe, 2014, p. 404). It has long been recognized that symptoms of anxiety and true anxiety disorders are quite common in children and adolescents (Muris, Schmidt, & Merckelbach, 2000, p. 334; Spence, Barrett, & Turner, 2003, p. 605; Whitaker Sena, Lowe, & Lee, 2007, p. 361). There is a wide range of emotions experienced by individuals in test and exam situations (Pekrun, Goetz, Perry, Kramer, Hochstadt, & Molfenter, 2004, p. 288). With this push for accountability, schools are seeing an increased number of students at the elementary, secondary, and postsecondary levels being diagnosed with test anxiety (McDonald, 2001, p. 93). As Pekrun, Goetz, Perry, Kramer, Hochstadt, & Molfenter (2004) stated, "thoughts and wishes to avoid failure and to escape exam situations are central to the experience of test anxiety" (p. 291).

Test anxiety affects people in every field of life, whenever people of all ages have to be evaluated, assessed, and graded with regard to their abilities, achievements, or interests' (Lufi, Okasha, & Cohen, 2004, p. 280). It affects students' motivation to learn and can affect their ability to benefit from instruction (Rana & Mahmood, 2010, p. 65). This test anxiety can cause students' progress to be delayed and can increase the cost of their education by causing their identification of tier placement and being in need of intervention support and/or retentions. Anxiety is also related to other school difficulties (such as lower test scores), low self-esteem and depression (Birmaher, Kheterpal, Brent, Cully, Balach, Kaufman, & Neer, 1997, p. 545; Peleg-Popko, 2002, p. 45). Children experiencing test anxiety often report feelings of worry, apprehension, and being tense (Lowe, 2014, p. 404). Research has also suggested that high anxious students often do not have the organizational skills needed to develop adequate study skills and aid in their learning of new information (Wigfield & Eccles, 1989, p. 159). With the increased number of tests being given to students and more diagnoses of test anxiety being given, it has been suggested that test anxiety research would continue to be a need as the focus on accountability through testing increases (Hembree, 1988, p. 75).

Test anxiety has been defined in many different ways. One definition has simply defined test anxiety "as an extreme fear of poor performance on tests and examinations" (Biedel, Turner, & Trager, 1994, p. 170; Chapell, Blanding, Silverstein, Takahashi, Newman, Gubi, & McCann, 2005, p. 267). Others have pointed to the complex nature of test anxiety by including in their definition the additional components of cognitive, emotional, behavioral and bodily reactions that are exhibited in individuals suffering

from test anxiety, and the symptoms that are present when students are in testing situations (Sarason, 1984, p. 931; Lowe, 2014, p. 404). This test anxiety can hinder the students' academic performance and their ability to learn the material (Suinn, 1969, p. 335). Pekrun, Goetz, Perry, Kramer, Hochstadt, & Molfenter (2004) adds that test anxiety is viewed as a specific personality trait while taking a test (p. 290).

### **Push for Testing in U.S. Schools**

According to Bodas and Ollendick (2005), "Schools and exams are an inevitable aspect of most children's lives in our modern world. Academic stress and test anxiety are thus ubiquitous problems in today's world" (p. 83). Shortly after the reauthorization of the Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA) known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, Wren and Benson (2004) touched on the increased push for testing in saying, "The testing of school-aged children in the United States has continued to increase over the past 25 years" (p. 227). This trend is primarily due to an emphasis on the accountability of schools to increase their students' achievement scores and close achievement gaps, such as the gap between low socioeconomic students and their more affluent peers (Lowe, 2014, p. 404; Whitaker et al., 2007, p. 360). NCLB mandated that states have a minimum participation rate of 95% for all 3<sup>rd</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in each school district each school year (U.S. Department of Education, NCLB). The increase in accountability put pressure on states to increase proficiency rates in reading and math. The individual student, teacher, and school results were used to enforce high stakes mandates, such as grade retention of students failing to meet basic proficiency,

determining teacher effectiveness for evaluation, and funding for schools serving low income students (Whitaker et al., 2007, p. 360; McDonald, 2001, p. 92).

Given the use of these tests to make such important high stakes decisions, it is no wonder that the pressure has slowly trickled down to teachers and students in tested grades and there has been an increased amount of test anxiety being exhibited in children exposed to testing environments (Wren & Benson, 2004, p. 228; Lowe, Lee, Witteborg, Prichard, Luhr, Cullinan, & Janik, 2008, p. 215-216). There have been increased calls for research focused on assisting students with overcoming test anxiety (Cassady & Johnson, 2001, p. 273) as well as research examining the “central issues of test anxiety” to better understand the underlying causes and effects (p. 270).

### **Factors Effecting Test Anxiety or Stress in Students**

Test anxiety has been the focus of research for over half a century. This research shows that “test anxiety is related to academic underachievement and academic failure, low self-esteem, dependency, and passivity. Furthermore, test anxiety can be a contributing factor to school refusal” (Beidel et al., 1994, p. 170). Some factors listed by Hembree (1988) as causes and sources of test anxiety include (a) gender, (b) grade school level, (c) ethnicity, (d) birth order, and (e) the school environment (p. 60). Parental expectations and socialization patterns of different cultures could put excessive pressure on students and thus attribute to an individual’s development of test anxiety (Bodas & Ollendick, 2005, p. 73). As a general observation, students with higher levels of academic ability suffer from test anxiety at a higher level than those with lower or average abilities. As it is helpful to know what factors attribute to a student’s stress, Putwain’s (2007)

research review established that the greatest overall predictor of a student experiencing test anxiety was their previous experience of test failure (p. 590).

**Gender's Potential Role in the Development of Test Anxiety.** As standardized tests continue to generate gender gaps in achievement despite decades of national attention, test anxiety could partially be the answer for this learning gap. Good, Aronson, & Inzlicht, 2003, p. 646). Spence, Barrett, & Turner (2003) found that the commonly reported test anxiety symptoms were similar for both male and female students (p. 621). Several researchers have explored gender differences attributing test anxiety and found that females tend to suffer from text anxiety at a higher rate than males (McDonald, 2001; Wigfield & Eccles, 1989; Hong & Karstensson, 2002; Whitaker Sena et al., 2007; Spence, 1997; Bodas & Ollendick, 2005; Cassady & Johnson; 2002; Lowe, 2014; Chappell et al., 2005; Hembree, 1988). One theory for this finding is that overall male and females may experience the same level of worry regarding test performance and outcome, but females may experience more emotionality than their male peers (Hong & Karstensson, 2002, p. 361; Putwain, 2007, p. 587). In relation to this, a lot of the measurements for determining test anxiety level are self-reporting in nature. Females may be willing to self-report test anxiety levels at a much higher rate than males (McDonald, 2001, p. 93; Putwain, 2007, p. 590; Whitaker Sena et al., 2007, p. 362). Based on that information, it may not be that gender differences are truly reflective of differences in levels of test anxiety, but are the reflections of the degree to which the different sexes are willing to report the test anxiety they are experiencing (Bodas & Ollendick, 2002, p. 274).

Another element that may factor into the differences between males and females concerns how the different genders rate themselves in terms of academic capabilities. Cassady & Johnson (2002) noted that females rate their capabilities lower than their male peers with less confidence, which opens the female up to more pronounced acceptance of self-doubting thoughts during tests as they perceive threats during assessments (p. 275). Studies have shown these gender differences are experienced across grade levels and development stages, a pattern that continues from childhood to adulthood (Chappell et al., 2005; Hembree, 1988; Lewinsohn et al., 1998). Zeidner (1999) was the only researcher attributing scholastic ability as the reason females have greater instances of test anxiety than males.

**Ethnicity's Potential Role in the Development of Test Anxiety.** In addition to the gender gap that appears on standardized achievement measures, there is also a consistent gap between Caucasian and African American students. Test anxiety could partially be credited for this achievement gap (Putwain, 2007, p. 590). Hembree (1988) reported that African American students display a much higher level of test anxiety than their Caucasian peers (p. 60). Hispanic students tend to fair better than their African American counterparts on standardized achievement tests and college enrollment, but Hispanic students still fall behind their Caucasian peers (Good et al., 2003, p. 646). In addition to the gap that appears between students of different ethnic groups on standardized tests, there is also a gap in the reporting of overall academic performance, self-esteem levels, school retentions, and graduation rates. "Educational practices, familial and/or societal expectations of academic achievement, or a combination of these



factors may play a contributory role in the substantial number of children experiencing significant anxiety and distress” (Beidler et al., 1994, p. 177). Although achievement gaps are often attributed to factors such as socioeconomic status, academic preparation, and educational opportunities, the achievement gaps between Caucasian and minority students (with the exception of African American students) are still represented when measures have been taken into consideration for discounting those factors (Osborne, 2001, p. 292). As minority students with test anxiety are reported to have higher negative levels in various areas of their education, it stands to reason that test anxiety has a greater role in the academic achievement of minority students than simply what is exhibited or performed during testing situations (Lowe, 2014, p. 404-405).

**Socioeconomic Status Link to the Development of Anxiety.** In addition to the gender and ethnicity of students experiencing test anxiety, several researchers have found a relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and test anxiety levels (Putwain, 2007; Osborne, 2001; McDonald, 2001). Higher levels of test anxiety were reported by those students who also were reported as being from low SES backgrounds (Putwain, p. 582; Osborne, p. 291). The minority students from African American and Hispanic families also report the largest number of families living in poverty (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Hispanics and African American students also had the highest level of high school dropouts on these reports. Research supports the idea that high test anxious students are also more likely to experience difficulties in school and have higher drop out rates (Lowe, 2014, p. 404-405).

**Parental Expectation's Role in the Development of Test Anxiety.** Interaction between parents and children can raise test anxiety levels during evaluations, influenced by the academic expectations parents have for their children (Wigfield & Eccles, 1989, p. 164). Often parents with overly high expectations have critical reactions to their child's performance on assessments and therefore the child is motivated to work to gain parental praise and avoid criticism. In comparison, parents with low-anxious children were more constructive and enthusiastic in response to their child's performance on academic measures (p. 165).

Another interesting note regarding parental role in the possible development of test anxiety in their children is the birth order of children in the family. The effects on birth order for first born children in a family appear to show no significant relationship in the development of test anxiety, but later born children seem to be somewhat more prone to experiencing test anxiety (Hembree, 1988, p. 60). Only children in a family seem to have the same relationship to test anxiety development as first-born children. The rationale for this dynamic was not fully explained, but there could be a tie to competition in sibling roles, family expectations for their children, parental experience with school expectations with subsequent children, etc.

**School-Based Factors Linked to the Development of Test Anxiety.** Several factors in the school environment have been linked to students' development of test anxiety. Teachers who have overly high expectations for their students may inadvertently create high-test anxious students by the manner in which they display criticism and provide feedback (Wigfield & Eccles, 1988, p. 169). Other related elements are the

structure of the learning environment and the expectations for class participation. In more loosely-structured, child-centered settings, there appears to be a higher level of test anxiety, which could increase the possibility of the test setting's being seen as a potential threat for high anxious students (p. 170).

Another element that appears to increase the stress or test anxiety level in students is the transition from elementary school to middle school. Test anxiety tends to begin around the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade for a lot of students (Hembree, 1988, p. 72). This trend steadily grows throughout the middle school years and peaks for most children between 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades. During the transition to middle school, a lot of students are beginning a time period with extensive opportunities for change. Wigfield & Eccles (1988) explain that a student transitioning to middle school often goes from being instructed by one teacher for the majority of their school day to having a different teacher for each period. During this time, there is often a switch in grading scales, the use of ability grouping in setting student schedules, and disruptions to social networks. All of these changes create a more impersonal, threatening, and unpleasant school environment for some students (p. 170). Middle school settings often employ evaluation methods that encourage competition and social comparison between students and these can increase a student's development of anxiety related to testing (p. 172).

The practices utilized during instruction and interventions also play a role in developing test anxiety in students. For example, Rana and Mahmood (2010) listed different teacher strategies that seem to help students dealing with test anxiety (p. 71). Teachers who worked to create positive thinking and helped students establish a purpose

for learning (and testing) appeared to have students reporting decreased test anxiety scores in subsequent screenings. It has been recommended for schools to screen all students for test anxiety in grades with high stakes assessments and provide identified students with interventions designed to develop coping strategies, such as encouraging students to seek social support from peers and teachers or utilize relaxation and visualization methods, in order to help students prepare for the anxiety they feel in testing situations (Stöber, 2004, p. 215).

Another researched strategy for helping students with test anxiety is playing music during testing situations. Students with reported high-test anxiety had an increase in performance scores when low levels of classical music were played during the testing session. However, this measure seemed to have the opposite affect on students with low levels of test anxiety reported (Hembree, 1988, p. 67). This may point to a need to utilize this method with high anxious students with small group testing accommodations on their individualized education plans (IEP).

Good et al. (2003) shared research regarding “stereotype threat” and its effect on student performance in academic settings including testing situations. Individuals may suffer “lower standardized test scores and less engagement in the academics” due to being “burdened with the prospect of confirming cultural stereotypes” (p. 647). Research shows simply learning the cultural expectations for their ethnic or gender group seemed to influence the individuals to perform at the level they perceive to be expected of them. Included in this research is a look at how the testing situation itself can affect those individuals influenced by stereotype threats, such as the gender or ethnic composition

mix in the testing room (p. 647). Shared earlier was the effect the transition to middle school can have on the level of test anxiety experienced by some students. Good et al. (2003) discussed research that showed “most children are not meaningfully affected by stereotype threat until the age of 11 or 12” (p. 648). This could further explain the achievement gaps experienced in schools for categorized students, such as lower SES, minority groups, and English language learners.

**Related Disorders to Test Anxiety.** As McDonald (2001) stated, “Test anxiety is a specific form of a wider group of problems characterized by feelings of anxiety” (p. 90). For individuals suffering from test anxiety in evaluative settings, they may also have a greater experience of having a decreased level of confidence in themselves and are more likely to experience anxiety in other areas of their life (Beidel et al., 1994, p. 170). There are many related disorders children can experience that may also follow them into adulthood. These related disorders include generalized anxiety disorder, separation anxiety disorder, social phobia, and trichotillomania.

Children who experience test anxiety experience the key components of general anxiety. Worry is a personality trait or characteristic that is a component of that individual. For example, if a student experiences worry in testing situations about their ability or their self worth, it stands to reason these same thoughts or feelings would follow them into different situations and settings. Social phobias or other anxiety disorders share a common feature those experiencing test anxiety. According to Beidel et al. (1994), all of these children have a “fear of negative evaluations by others” (p. 170) and this could point to test anxiety being a symptom of the larger disorder. Specific

anxiety disorders are defined based on their overall defining trait, which include “panic attacks, separation anxiety, generalized anxiety, phobia, obsession-compulsions, and depersonalization and/or derealization experience” (Chambers, Puig-Antich, Hirsh, Paez, Ambrosini, Tabrizi, & Davies, 1985, p. 700). An essential feature of all of these disorders is the feeling of “excessive or unrealistic worry” that is concerned with a personal or emotional threat to some aspect of one’s life (Silverman et al., 1995, p. 672). This excessive worry could involve being separated from a parent or other caretaker, being scolded by someone who’s opinion they value, betrayal in a relationship with peers or experiencing failure on a test.

**Feelings and Effects for Students with High Test Anxiety.** Childhood anxiety is a common occurrence and at one time it was thought that around 8-12% of children experience some form of an anxiety disorder that can interfere with their daily lives (Spence, 1997, p. 545). Another researcher pointed out that test anxiety numbers can be hard to provide as most measures involve self-reporting, but estimates the number could be more around one third of students in U.S. schools and continues to increase in response to federal mandates such as those in No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (Lowe et al., 2008, p. 216). Many factors help students have good academic performance, such as organized study skills, motivation to go to college, motivation to learn a specific skill and understanding of teacher expectations (Tyron, 1980, p. 348). Children experiencing anxiety disorders often lack these skills and face negative consequences including social, scholastic, and personal ramifications. Rana and Mahmood (2010) reported students consistently report increased anxiety during evaluations that they view

as being unfair and an inaccurate measure of their abilities (p. 63). They also reported students share experiences of feeling uneasy, upset, nervous, tense, anxious, and panicky on or during testing (p. 71). In their study on test anxiety, Pekrun et al. (2004) reported participants sharing feelings of anger, shame, and hopelessness (p. 296).

Bodas and Ollendick (2005) also reported on the physical changes observed in high-test anxious students. They reported somatic measures also seen in individuals during evaluations, which include rapid heartbeats, raised blood pressure, sweaty palms, and dry mouths (p. 71). Whitaker Sena et al. (2007) also reported high-test anxiety students showing signs of shallow breathing in the periods before and during testing (p. 361). Bodas and Ollendick noted in a videotaped observation of students during one assessment that a change in classroom behaviors could be documented, such as attending behaviors, task-related behaviors, communications, and interactional behaviors. They were careful to note observational research such as this has the potential limitation of observer bias and reliability bias, but recommended this could be helped through the use of predetermined observational categories and observer training in future research.

Hodapp and Benson (1997) touched on the relationship of self-efficacy and test anxiety (p. 223). As they explain it, “Individuals feel confident when they trust their capacity to cope with a situation, or trust in their abilities when challenged by a task...A person trusts his or her competence for doing well” (p. 223). Due to their increased level of anxiety over testing, high-anxious individuals do not trust their ability to perform well when taking tests therefore they experience lower levels of self-efficacy, which is controlled by the cognitive worry component of anxiety. Cassady and Johnson (2002)

examined the other component of test anxiety, the affective component (emotionality). As they stated, “emotionality is the individual’s awareness of the heightened autonomic arousal rather than the arousal itself” (p. 271). As long as the student had high levels of self-confidence and high self-efficacy, high levels of emotionality had little effect on the outcome of a student’s performance on the exam, but they would experience sweating, increased heart rates, dizziness, nausea, and feelings of panic. In addition to the anxiety individuals’ feel in testing situations, anxiety can also be exhibited in non-testing situations (Wittmaier, 1972, p. 352). This is referred to as “academic anxiety”. Academic anxiety refers to the evaluative nature students experience in other areas of instruction, including meeting proficiency in their learning of state standards, class participation, and status in their peer groups (Gottfried, 1982, p. 205-206).

### **Issues with Standardized Testing Discussed in the Opt Out Movement**

The results of the 2014 PDK/Gallup Poll showed a deep disconnect between education policy makers and the American public when it comes to school reform (Phi Delta Kappa International, 2014). In fact, 68% of public school parents polled in America do not believe standardized assessments are useful and 54% do not believe these tests inform teachers on what they should teach (PDK, 2014). Other parents do not like that standardized assessments are being tied to teachers’ job performances and pay. Individuals also do not feel standardized assessments accurately measure student ability. Across the country, the opt out movement has been growing for some time and for many reasons.



Although only recently gaining media attention, the opt out movement has origins prior to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) reauthorization of ESEA in 2001. In 1989, parents in Torrence, California grew tired of the testing happening in their children's school. They responded by refusing to allow their children to participate in testing (Kohn, 2001, p. 355). Beginning with one school and one group of parents, the movement has continued to grow and become more organized with opt out measures happening across the country. Over 120 Facebook groups have popped up for parents with at least one designated in each state and a total of 137,928 members across the groups. Students, parents, and teachers are taking a stand against the amount of testing and the high stakes attached to the assessments happening in public schools. For example, "In 2013, teachers across four Seattle high schools boycotted the state's standardized exam" and refused to administer the exam to their students (Kawaii et. al., 2014, p. 488). In 2014, two award winning first grade teachers in Colorado refused to administer standardized tests after they saw the effects of computerized assessments on their students. They calculated 288 instructional hours were being lost to all of the testing mandated for their primary grade classrooms. The teachers wrote letters to their students' parents to inform them of their decision to opt out of assessment administration and their belief in more authentic assessment practices, such as portfolios (Strauss, 2014).

In 2015, over 62,000 eleventh graders failed to show up for the state mandated Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) test in Washington State (Coalition to Protect Our Public Schools, 2015). An increasing number of colleges, including Drew University in New Jersey, have eliminated the test score requirement of their admissions

policy as they do not believe test scores provide true measures of what students will be capable of doing in their college courses (2015, May 28 2:10pm EDT). In 2014, a father in Hamilton County, Tennessee was allowed to opt his child out of standardized testing after he witnessed the effects of his son's test anxiety, but he was told he was not allowed to do so the following year. He held his ground and chose to remove his child from school during the testing window (McCarthy, 2015).

Due to mandates coming out of NCLB and RTTT, high stakes tests are an important component of educational reform efforts and accountability measures even though educational research points to the argument that these tests only provide one piece to the puzzle and should not be used for such high stakes measures (Dutro & Selland, 2012, p. 343). Nichols and Berliner (2007) argue high stake testing mandates lead to a corruption of the system (p. 26-27). They point to the work of a social psychologist Campbell (1979) who stated that “the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision making, the more subject that it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt social processes it was intended to monitor” (p. 85). Parents and teachers have pointed to problems with the increased focus on test scores as it leads to a narrowing of the curriculum; an instructional focus that provides interventions for students on the bubble of proficiency; the denying of services to students at the high and low ends of the continuum; and the limiting of instructional time devoted to non-tested subject areas (Dutro & Selland, 2012, p. 341; Valenzuela et. al., 2015, p. 2). Even in instances where “cheating” has not occurred, research shows “better

standardized exam results are more likely to go hand in hand with a shallow approach to learning than with deep understanding” (Kohn, 2001, p. 350).

United Opt Out (UOO) is a national organization focused on the “unyielding resistance to corporate education reform” (UOO, 2015). UOO maintains a national website designed to assist parents across the United States in opting their children out of standardized assessments. Each state has links to materials directly pertaining to legislation dealing with the assessments given to students in their state and provides information on how to opt out of the assessments. The website has letters tailored to each state’s legislation for parents to use when informing their child’s teacher, school, and district of their decision to opt their children out of standardized assessments. At the time of this writing, New York State had the most comprehensive opt out guide for parents and teachers to use (Polos, Cerrone, & Kilfoyle, 2015). In this guide, the authors address reasons why parents in New York are choosing to opt their child out of standardized tests, which include the high stakes for students, schools, and districts attached to those assessments, the amount of instructional time lost to test preparation and test administration, and the effects of these tests on children and teachers in public schools.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this literature review, I provided the educational and research contexts that have led to opposition toward high stakes testing. I described the federal laws that have governed the standardized assessments that are being given to children in public schools across the United States, including the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation

Act of 1973, and the newly authorized Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Next, I discussed the assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) that states adopted in order to fulfill requirements of their acceptance of funding from Race to the Top (RTTT): the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). I also presented some of the controversy surrounding the use of these assessments, such as cost, lack of educator input in the assessment design, and the performance capabilities of the computer-based operating platforms, a short discussion on the assessment states are adopting as they are moving away from SBAC and PARCC known as Questar, and information on state developed alternatives, such as TNReady. I introduced examples of large scale assessments some individuals consider to be alternatives to the annual testing being required of all students after grade 3. The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) are large, scale assessments, which have been used for years to compare states or countries. These assessments have the platform available to be used widely as a yardstick to assess the quality of instruction being provided in schools in the United States.

I reviewed the available literature on the effects testing has on American children. I discussed the factors related to an individual, which may contribute to their having a greater predisposition to developing test anxiety. I gave examples of related disorders to test anxiety and the feelings and effects these assessments have on students. The literature review concluded with information on standardized testing and the opt out movement in the United States as it has been portrayed in the media.

As Chapter 2 contained the review of literature pertaining to the context of standardized assessments and the research behind the effects of high stakes testing on children, it points to the understanding already available in the research as to why individuals could be opposed to this type of testing in their children's schools. It provides a basis for parental arguments against the use of standardized assessments for high stakes, such as promotion and graduation requirements, by showing what is known about the testing currently happening in public schools across the country. In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodology for this study including the data collection and data analysis processes.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Overview of the Study**

In this study, I investigated how the study's participants view the tests that their children are given in K-12 school settings, how participants define standardized assessments, and how they describe the impacts of these standardized assessments on their children's emotional and physical well-being, which may have led them to participate in the opt out movement. The goal for this study was to explore the effects of standardized assessments on families, how some families view the accountability movement, and begin to describe who is choosing to participate in the opt out movement spreading across the country. I want to provide a face to some of the individuals who are behind the testing data being used to create mandates in public education or to influence public opinion regarding the opt out movement. This study examined the following research questions:

1. Who are some of the individuals who are participating in the opt out movement?
2. How are some individuals making the decision to participate in the opt out movement?
  - a. What knowledge do these individuals who are participating in the opt out movement have regarding the assessments that their children are being given in public schools?
  - b. How have these individuals who are participating in the opt out movement been affected by the standardized assessments being given in public schools?

Based on my interest in working with participants of the opt out movement, I wanted to begin by collecting descriptive data via a web-based census survey. The study began with an anonymous census survey link posted on the social media site Facebook in groups designated for individuals interested in discussing and learning more about the opt out movement. A link to the survey was also emailed to recognized leaders in the opt out movement in order for them to forward the link to individuals whom they knew were participating in the opt out movement and who may not have otherwise been reached through social media. At the end of the census survey, individuals were asked if they were interested in learning about participating in follow-up interviews about their family's experiences with standardized testing and the opt out movement. Interviewees were asked to share any additional information or documents they believed would add to deeper understanding of their family's experiences.

The framework for this study is most consistent with the views of the interpretivist traditions, which “portray a world in which reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever changing” (Glesne, 2011, p. 8). It was the ultimate goal of this study to describe how participants view their experience with standardized assessments and the effects of those assessments on their families. “Interpretive research assumes that reality is socially constructed, that is, there is no single, observable reality. Rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event” (Merriam, 2009, p. 8). I was interested in investigating *how participants view the standardized assessments that their children are expected to take in school and why they have decided to participate in the opt out movement*. It was my belief as a researcher that there are effects of testing

influencing the decisions participants make in regards to their family's participation in the opt out movement. It was my further hope to work with participants in order to gain a better understanding of their lived experiences with standardized assessments and to describe the individuals who are participating in the opt out movement.

### **Rationale for Census Survey & Interview Methodologies**

I used the research methods of census survey and descriptive interviews to conduct a study geared toward better understanding the lived experiences of individuals involved in the opt out movement. The media has primarily focused on individuals participating in the opt out movement in New York and Washington states. By designing the initial phase of the study as a census survey with open-ended responses and demographic questions, I was able to send it out on a national level to reach the highest number of individuals participating in the opt out movement.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of some families' stories, I employed the qualitative research method of descriptive interviews with selected census participants. This method was best for gaining a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of individuals and for providing a glimpse of the movement participants are constructing together on a national level. Interview participants were also asked to share artifacts supporting their stories and experiences if they wished.

### **Participants/Recruitment**

In this study, I sought to learn from individuals who are participating in the opt out movement across the United States. I wanted to learn (1) who some of the participants of the opt out movement are; (2) what their experiences were with



standardized assessments; and (3) why they ultimately decided to participate in the opt out movement. The study consisted of two phases: the national census survey and the descriptive interviews.

### **Census Survey**

Facebook groups and pages for individuals interested in the opt out movement were identified for regions across the United States (Appendix A), and group or page administrator approval for these was sought to post the anonymous census survey link. This link informed group members of the research purpose and invited them to complete the anonymous census survey (Appendices B-D). Individuals were also asked to forward the anonymous census survey link via email or private messages to anyone they knew who might be interested but might not have been reached via social media efforts.

The anonymous census survey link was also sent via email to individuals who are widely viewed as experts in the opt out movement, asking them to share the anonymous census survey link with those whom they believe have information or experiences with the opt out movement and might be able to add to the research conversation. These individuals were: Diane Ravitch, Peggy Robertson, Valerie Strauss, and Janet Deutermann, as well as individuals identified on the public United Opt Out webpage as being state coordinators for the opt out movement (Appendix E-F). The emails were sent using the survey email distribution feature of Qualtrics.

To determine the size of the sample for the anonymous census survey, online sample size calculators were used. For a confidence level of 95% and a 4.99 margin of error, the sample size needed for the unknown number of opt out participants in the US

was 385. Therefore, the goal for the census survey was to have a minimum of 385 respondents from across the country. Follow-up census survey recruitment posts were made after 14 days and 30 days on the Facebook group pages (Appendix G).

## **Interviews**

My hope was to be able to identify individuals with heterogeneous lived experiences with standardized assessments and who are participating in some manner in the opt out movement across the United States. Interviewees were recruited via a screen at the end of the census survey asking for individuals who were willing to learn more about being interviewed. Because the census survey was completely anonymous, participants willing to be interviewed were not linked to their data, so they were asked to complete an online interview protocol, which could be linked to them. These individuals were asked to type/electronically sign the informed consent of the interview screening protocol and provide their contact information in the event they were selected for an interview (Appendix H-I).

As potential interview candidates completed the online interview protocol (Appendix J), their responses were recorded within Qualtrics. These were read and coded to help identify individuals with diverse experiences and geographic locations. As prospective interview candidates were identified, they were contacted for follow-up requests and to obtain informed consent (Appendix K). The interviews were designed to be semi-structured and set to be conducted via Zoom, Skype, FaceTime, or phone call. The interviews were semi-structured to allow the participants to take the interview in the direction that best met the needs of their individual story. However, an interview protocol

was designed to ensure all participants were asked the same questions, but was semi-structured in order to allow flexibility (Appendix L). All selected interview participants requested to participate via phone interviews. Participants were also asked to share any documents or other artifacts they believe would enhance the understanding of their stories.

### **Sampling**

The study was not intended to generalize to the entire population of individuals in the opt out movement, but instead was intended (1) to describe the individuals who participated in the census survey and (2) to begin to sketch a picture of the lived experiences of those individuals. Participants were recruited to complete the census survey portion of the study by utilizing purposeful sampling. This allowed the study to have participants who have the most to add to the understanding of the phenomenon I am studying by seeking participants from the movement of study (Merriam, 2009, p. 77; Cresswell, 2013, p. 100-101). The web-based census survey link was posted (1) to Facebook groups designed for individuals participating in the opt out movement and (2) via email to leaders involved in the opt out movement.

Participants were selected for the interview portion of the study using maximum variation sampling. They were “selected based on differences in characteristics” (Hatch, 2002, p. 50) using purposeful sampling methods. As Merriam (2009) explains, the researcher “must first determine what selection criteria are essential in choosing the people or sites to be studied” and “select individuals based on the attributes that are essential to the study” (p. 77).

Participants selected for the interview portion of the study must have shared knowledge of participation in the opt out movement in their interview screening protocols. However, participants did not have to have prior experience opting their children out. In order to showcase multiple perspectives on the opt out movement, I selected interviewees who varied as much as possible on these characteristics (as disclosed in the interview screening protocol):

- How they decided to get involved in the opt out movement;
- Their family experiences with standardized assessments;
- How their families have been affected by standardized assessments;
- Their experience within the opt out movement; and
- Available demographic information, such as gender and state.

“In qualitative research, a single case, or small, nonrandom, purposeful sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many” (Merriam, 2009, p. 224). Participants were not selected to generalize to the entire population of participants within the opt out movement or all participants within this study, but were chosen to illustrate their own experiences and understandings of standardized assessments and the opt out movement.

### **Data Collection**

This study had two phases of data collection: the web-based census survey and the descriptive interview portion. The two phases overlapped, as interviews began while the census survey was still in progress. Additional data in the form of artifacts was requested from interview participants to enhance their stories (See Table 3.1).

**Table 3.1: Research Questions, Data Collection, Data Analysis**

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Data Collection</b>	<b>Data Analysis</b>
<p>Overall Question: How the study participants view the standardized assessments that their children are expected to take in school and why they have decided to participate in the opt out movement?</p>	<p>Field Notes of Independent Reading            Census Survey Responses            Interview Protocol Responses            Audio Recordings/Transcripts of Interviews</p>	<p>Read and review census survey responses. Identify trends &amp; patterns. Categorize &amp; code participant responses based on independent reading, previous study results, census survey responses, interview protocol responses, &amp; interview data. Transcribe/Review Audio Recordings from Interviews. Write rich descriptions of participants' experiences &amp; demographic participant responses.</p>
<p>Research Question 1: Who are some of the individuals that are participating in the opt out movement?</p>	<p>Field Notes of Independent Reading            Census Survey Responses            Interview Protocol Responses            Audio Recordings/Transcripts of Interviews</p> <p>Census Survey Questions: 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 14, 15, 16, 18, 21, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32            Interview Protocol Questions: 6, 17, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28            Interview Questions: 1, 3</p>	<p>Read and review census survey responses. Identify trends &amp; patterns. Categorize &amp; code participant responses based on independent reading, previous study results, census survey responses, interview protocol responses, &amp; interview data. Transcribe/Review Audio Recordings from Interviews. Write rich descriptions of participants' experiences &amp; demographic participant responses.</p>
<p>Research Question 2: How are some individuals making the decision to participate in the opt out movement?</p>	<p>Field Notes of Independent Reading            Census Survey Responses            Interview Protocol Responses            Audio Recordings/Transcripts of Interviews</p> <p>Census Survey Questions: 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 17, 32            Interview Protocol Questions: 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 28            Interview Questions: 1, 2, 3, 4</p>	<p>Read and review census survey responses. Identify trends &amp; patterns. Categorize &amp; code participant responses based on independent reading, previous study results, census survey responses, interview protocol responses, &amp; interview data. Transcribe/Review Audio Recordings from Interviews. Write rich descriptions of participants' experiences &amp; demographic participant responses.</p>

**Table 3.1: Research Questions, Data Collection, Data Analysis Continued**

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Data Collection</b>	<b>Data Analysis</b>
<p>Research Question 2a: What knowledge do these individuals who are participating in the opt out movement have regarding the assessments that their children are being given in public schools?</p>	<p>Field Notes of Independent Reading            Census Survey Responses            Interview Protocol Responses            Audio Recordings/Transcripts of Interviews</p> <p>Census Survey Questions: 4, 11, 12, 13, 21, 22, 32            Interview Protocol Questions: 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 14, 15, 16, 20, 21, 27, 28            Interview Questions: 1, 4</p>	<p>Read and review census survey responses. Identify trends &amp; patterns. Categorize &amp; code participant responses based on independent reading, previous study results, census survey responses, interview protocol responses, &amp; interview data. Transcribe/Review Audio Recordings from Interviews. Write rich descriptions of participants' experiences &amp; demographic participant responses.</p>
<p>Research Question 2b: How have these individuals that are participating in the opt out movement been affected by the standardized assessments being given in public schools?</p>	<p>Field Notes of Independent Reading            Census Survey Responses            Interview Protocol Responses            Audio Recordings/Transcripts of Interviews</p> <p>Census Survey Questions: 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 32            Interview Protocol Questions: 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 17, 18, 19, 23, 24, 25, 26            Interview Questions: 1, 4</p>	<p>Read and review census survey responses. Identify trends &amp; patterns. Categorize &amp; code participant responses based on independent reading, previous study results, census survey responses, interview protocol responses, &amp; interview data. Transcribe/Review Audio Recordings from Interviews. Write rich descriptions of participants' experiences &amp; demographic participant responses.</p>

## **Census Survey**

Survey research can be used to describe the target population of a phenomenon by describing the respondents, and “the answers people give can be used to accurately describe characteristics of the respondents” (Fowler, 2014, p. 8). It was not the goal of this study to generalize to all of the participants in the opt out movement or all individuals affected by standardized assessments, but rather to provide a face to some of those who are generally left out of the research conversation by describing this particular group of opt out participants. This study employed a census survey protocol given to participants via the internet (Appendices B-D). Typically, census surveys of this type are referred to as web-based surveys or electronic surveys (Colton & Colvert, 2007, p. 344).

The web-based census survey began with an informed consent screen. After acknowledging their understanding of the study and giving their permission to continue participating, participants were asked questions related to their knowledge of the standardized assessments in K-12 public schools in the United States and their families' experiences with standardized assessments. They were also asked questions about the effects standardized assessments may have had on their children's mental and physical well-being, as well as any signs of test anxiety their children may have exhibited. At the end of the census survey, there was a series of demographic survey questions seeking information which could better aid in painting the picture of who the participants of the opt out movement are in the context of this study.

The census survey was designed and distributed using Qualtrics, which allows reporting of how the survey was distributed and from what distribution method responses

were received. The census survey was distributed using direct posts to social media and email links. As individuals also forwarded the survey link to other individuals, these were reported in the program as anonymous links. For the social media distribution channel within Qualtrics, the program reported receiving 320 responses. The program sent out 64 invites over email. Of those email invites, 12 surveys were started and 7 responses were reported. Qualtrics also keeps track of anonymous links and reported 116 responses using this method. It was not reported within the program whether these links were shared via email or social media distribution methods. In total, 421 of the respondents who indicated they wished to participate in the study completed it. An additional 18 individuals gave consent to participate in the study and their surveys were started, but were left incomplete. Participants were allowed to answer or skip any questions they did not wish to answer and were allowed to return to any question they had previously answered.

## **Interviews**

Descriptive interview methods were selected in order to gain a deeper and richer understanding of the lived experiences of at least 6 participants. Interviews can aid researchers as the “meaning structures are often hidden from direct observation and taken for granted by participants, and qualitative interview techniques offer tools for bringing these meanings to the surface” (Hatch, 2002, p. 91). Interviewing allows the researcher and the participant an opportunity to have a “conversation with a purpose” in which the focus is “on questions related to the research study” in regards to the behavior, feelings, and/or people’s interpretations of their world or past experiences (Merriam, 2009, p. 88).



At the end of census survey portion of the study, the participants were asked if they were interested in continuing their participation in the study by completing an interview screening protocol and possibly being contacted for follow-up interviews. Although the census survey was anonymous and could not be linked to individual participants, the interview screening protocol was confidential and linked to individual participants; thus some questions from the census were repeated in the screening in order to help select interview participants. Individuals completing the interview screening protocol were asked to provide a typed/electronic signature to indicate their consent for participation. These participants were asked to provide contact information. Qualtrics also reported the location of the IP address.

The interview screening protocol contained a total of 29 questions (See Appendix L). The first portion of the protocol asked questions regarding knowledge of high stakes testing and how much participants valued the assessments given in their children's classrooms. It also asked questions regarding how they felt about the tests given in their children's schools. Participants were also asked what, if any, changes to their child's mental or physical well-being were noticed. They were asked if their child showed any changes in attitude or if they had noticed any signs of test anxiety in their children. Participants were asked if any options were made available to them with regard to the assessments given to their children and about any obstacles they faced when attempting to opt their children out of standardized assessments. Additionally, they were asked why or why not they had chosen to opt their child out of standardized testing, as well as provide any additional information they wanted to share regarding their family's

experiences with standardized testing. In total, 108 participants completed the interview screening protocol and indicated a desire to continue their participation in the study.

In order to ensure a rich, description of each participant's experiences, semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide. A semi-structured interview format was chosen as it allowed the interviewer to be open to following the participants in the direction they wanted to take the interview (Hatch, 2002; Appendix L). Probes were also used in order to seek further information or clarification as needed to better understand individual stories. Eight phone interviews were conducted using an iPhone6. Researcher notes were kept during the interviews and the interviews were audio recorded with a digital recorder. The interviews were transcribed verbatim (Paulus et. al., 2014). Any excerpts of the interview data included in the report used what is referred to as "a usual compromise", which involved modifying the participant's words by eliminating "some participant's words, sentences, and paragraphs—and also, most of the time, their own questions"—in order to achieve a more compact statement. However, no words were changed or added to the participants' statements (Weiss, 1994, p. 194). After the interviews were transcribed and member checked with participants, the audio files were destroyed.

At the onset of the study, the goal was to conduct a minimum of 6 interviews. However, 12 willing participants were selected for interviews based on their geographic location; gender; ethnicity; view of standardized assessments; experience with standardized testing; or involvement in the opt out movement. Of the 12 willing participants selected for interviews, eight interviews were completed.

Four interviews were not conducted after follow-up contact was made, for a variety of reasons. One participant had a death in the family and was no longer available to be interviewed. One participant was an educator who expressed a desire to remain anonymous. I explained I could promise her confidentiality and cleaning of her data to ensure there was no identifying information presentation of her information, but I could not promise her anonymity due to the mere fact I knew who she was. She decided to not participate in the interview portion of the study. One of the participants expressed interest in being interviewed and returned the signed informed consent, but never responded to follow-up emails to schedule an interview time. The fourth potential interview candidate responded that he preferred to conduct the interview in person. An IRB request was made to allow face-to-face interviewing and was granted in time to allow the request. However, the participant did not respond to phone calls made in order to set up an interview time.

### **Artifacts**

Interview participants were asked to supply any documents they believed would add to the stories they shared. These documents could have included anything the participant felt was relevant to their experience, such as letters from the state prohibiting schools from allowing parents to opt their children out of standardized assessments, communications between the home and school, or other relevant documents. One participant supplied correspondences with state officials, school board members, and school administrators. He supplied his family's opt out letter and letters to the editor of his local newspaper regarding parental involvement in education and issues with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). This participant also shared a presentation

regarding the controversy with CCSS and PARCC he and his wife presented at the local library in their community as a response to the information the school district was sharing from the state department of education.

Another interview participant supplied her family's refusal letter along with a copy of the school district's reply to their request. She also forwarded articles related to information that she shared during her interview, such as an article related to her mention of the pineapple and hare regents exam question that her son experienced firsthand (Hartocollis, 2012, April 20).

### **Data Analysis**

The goal for this study was to work to provide some participants with a research platform to get their opinions, experiences, and needs into the larger research conversation and potentially into the federal and state political conversation regarding standardized assessments. This study was designed to explore the effects of standardized assessments on families, how some families view the accountability movement, and begin to describe some of the individuals who are choosing to participate in the opt out movement spreading across the country. As such, data analysis in this study began before the first piece of data was collected by engaging in reflective processing throughout each phase of the study. This process involved recording my thoughts and reactions to the readings for the literature review and media coverage of the opt out movement. Reflections were also kept in a reflective journal while reading through participant responses to questions in the census survey, interview screening protocol, and interview portions of the study. Data analysis was simultaneous and ongoing throughout the study

(Merriam, 1998). As new data were collected, the same process for data storage and data coding was followed, as well as reviewing the rest of the data set. I checked my list of key phrases and patterns in order to see what new things emerged and what connections could be made to the rest of the data set.

### **Census Survey**

Phase I of the study was designed to help describe the participants of the study by gaining an understanding of who they are, what experiences they have had with standardized assessments, and their experiences participating in the opt out movement. The census survey consisted of closed and open-ended questions. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data of the participants in this study, but were not used to generalize this sample of data to the larger pool of opt out participants or individuals who have experiences with standardized assessments. Using the 'Report Tab' in Qualtrics, the closed questions were counted and recorded to present the actual number of respondents who answered each question as frequency counts and percentages. Next, these questions were cross-checked with additional information by assigning the question as a data source and breaking it out by each demographic question, such as gender being cross-checked with employment status, income level, marital status, etc. Demographic information was cross-checked with individuals who selected yes for the prompt 'Have you opted your child(ren) out ?' Demographic information was also cross-checked with individuals who wished to learn more about the interview portion of the study; individuals made aware of available testing options; and individuals who noticed signs of mental, physical, and text anxiety in their children. Participant responses indicating they

had opted their children out of testing were also cross checked with individuals who had seen signs of changes in their children's mental or physical well being or if they had seen signs of test anxiety to see if there was a high number of individuals opting out who had observed effects of testing in their children. Then, the responses were reported as bar graphs with frequency counts and percentages provided by breakout question. Finally, bar graphs with frequency counts and percentages and content clouds were also created for the Topics created in the 'Data Analysis' tab for the open ended responses. Each respondent file was printed and coded using the coding frame described next.

### **Qualitative Content Analysis**

Qualitative content analysis was used for all of the open ended, qualitative data collected in the census survey and interview portions of the study. Qualitative content analysis was chosen as it is "a method for describing the meaning of qualitative material in a systematic way. You do this by assigning successive parts of your material to the categories of your coding frame" (Schreier, 2012, p. 1). Qualitative content analysis in this study began by organizing the data and making memo notes in the margin of the census survey (Cresswell, 2013, p. 190-191). A coding frame was developed based on main categories within the research questions in order to provide a systematic way to organize the memo notes: view of standardized assessments; participant description; decision to opt out; assessment knowledge; opt out experience; and effects of standardized assessments.

## **Coding**

Coding provides research question alignment with the analysis process in order to describe patterns and themes in the data (Saldaña, 2013, p. 61). Qualitative content analysis is appropriate for descriptive research involving documents, texts, videos, etc. Qualitative content analysis and coding are thought to be different methods, but they are both useful for “descriptive studies that seek to describe a phenomenon” (Schreier, 2012, p. 44). The interview data were analyzed into codes and themes in order to describe the case and context of the participants. Six different types of codes were used in analyzing the data: descriptive, In Vivo, themeing, patterning, emotion, and versus coding.

**Descriptive Coding.** Descriptive codes were used to label the content of participants’ responses and any documents interviewees supplied to support information shared during their interviews. Descriptive coding is appropriate for qualitative research, because it allows the researcher to ‘assign basic labels to data to provide an inventory of their topics’ (Saldaña, 2013, p. 83). It is especially relevant when seeking to identify factors that influence participants’ actions or understandings (p. 61). In this study, labels/topics assigned to participant responses included: participant research base, threats/bullying tactics, obstacles, alternative testing options, communication, effects on children, effects on teachers, effects on schools, instructional effects, participant feelings, high stakes, big business model, and family support of testing.

**In Vivo Coding.** In Vivo coding was used in “naming the exact words used by participants” (Cresswell, 2013, p. 185) of each census survey and interview response. Both descriptive and In Vivo coding are appropriate for descriptive studies as they allow

the researcher to share participant experiences and allow the reader to hear the voice of the study participants (Saldaña, 2013, p. 91). These codes were placed in the content or tag cloud generator, later used to identify categories or themes prominent in the study.

Content or tag clouds provide researchers a method for visualizing the data collected and coded in any study using content analysis (Cidell, 2010, p. 514). What makes content or tag cloud generators a valuable tool in qualitative research is they create visual word clouds of the content on a page by sizing key words differently according to frequency (p. 514). Another benefit to the use of content clouds is they allow the researcher a method to quickly trace codes or themes across different participants or data sources (p. 516).

Cidell (2010) does make a note of caution for the use of word clouds in reference to the potential for bias. As the content cloud generator produces a visual image in which words occurring more frequently stand out more predominantly in a larger font than less frequently used words, it could distract the researcher from more important concepts that were touched on, but mentioned less (p. 516). Another drawback to using content cloud generators is they break apart phrases into words parts. An example of this would include the phrase 'opt out'. Content cloud generators divide the phrase into two parts 'opt' and 'out'. Because out is a word used frequently in the English language, it gets taken out of the equation. Thus, content clouds for this study display the word 'opt' as its own concept.

These prominent codes were compared with the literature review. These were defined before creating 'Topics' within Qualtrics in an effort to provide consistency in



subsequent coding cycles, coding across census survey participants, and the linking of codes to categories and themes in the census survey portion of the study.

**Themeing and Pattern Coding.** A second cycle coding was completed by conducting a combination of themeing and pattern coding of the data. As Saldaña states, “A theme is an abstract entity that brings meaning and identity to a recurrent (patterned) experience and its variant manifestations” (p. 176). Patterns can take a variety of forms and exhibit a variety of characteristics; they can show: (a) things happen in the same way; (b) things happen in different ways; (c) how often things happen; (d) the order in which things happen; (e) how things happen in relation to other things; or (f) if one thing caused another thing to happen (Saldaña, 2009, p. 6). In this study, patterns emerged related to how families informed their children’s schools they wanted to opt out and how the schools reacted to their requests.

**Emotion and Versus Coding.** Emotion and versus coding were used to explore participant responses. Emotion coding examines “the emotions recalled and/or experienced by the participants or inferred by the researcher about the participant” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 105). Predominantly, emotion was displayed in this study in response to how participants felt their children were treated by members of the school staff or school administration. Responses explaining the effects of standardized assessments on their children were also coded for emotions.

Versus coding was used to identify dichotomous situations in the data in which participants shared conflicts between the home and school or their views and classroom practice. This coding was completed using Saldaña’s (2013) categories of “stakeholders,

perceptions/actions, issues” (p. 117). The identified “stakeholders” for this study were the children, parents, teachers/educators, schools, and state education officials. “Perceptions” were how participants viewed actions taken by the school regarding their request to opt out or options made available to participants in opting their children out. “Issues” in this study related to the concerns participants had with the accountability movement and the testing occurring in K-12 schools across the country. Issues were also related to the reasons why families were choosing to opt their children out of standardized assessments.

### **Interviews**

Analysis for the descriptive interview portion of this study generated answers to the research questions by following the procedures of interpretivist research. As a researcher interested in conducting this line of research, I worked to “observe, ask questions, and interact with research participants’ and then analyze the data by looking for patterns” (Glesne, 2011, p. 8). I seek to use the data to describe the lived experiences of some of the participants of this study in the opt out movement and how they have been affected by standardized assessments. As such, the analysis of the 8 interview participants was conducted as 8 individual cases and not as one large case study. A data binder was kept with separate files for each of the eight interviewees containing their interview screening protocol, interview transcript, and any additional documents supplied by them they believed added to their story.

The individual interviews were coded as individual cases relating to information pertaining to their unique and individual experiences with standardized assessments and within the opt out movement. After the data were initially analyzed, potential researcher

bias or influence in the analysis was monitored by asking a fellow graduate student to use the coding categories “to conduct an independent analysis” of portions of the research data (Colton & Covert, 2007, p. 236).

The constant comparative method was used to analyze the qualitative interview data in the study by making comparisons from a particular incident in one piece of data with other pieces of data in the study (Merriam, 1998, p. 158). Although the individuals in this study were selected to represent a heterogeneous sample of participants in the opt out movement, there were times when a participant’s raising of an issue led me to go back to previous interview transcripts to determine if other interviewees had also addressed the same issue. The artifacts provided by participants were also analyzed using qualitative content analysis and coding.

At the last stage of data analysis, each interview participant’s file was read through again and narratives were created for each participant. Using descriptive analysis from the interview screening protocol, the interview, and participant-supplied artifacts, narratives were written to portray my interpretations of the participants’ experiences with standardized assessments and the opt out movement. After the narratives were written, all of the data for each participant were read through once more in order to pick out strong quotes which reflected their experiences with standardized assessments and the opt out movement. Participants’ words and selected quotes were used to allow my readers to be able to hear the voice of my participants.

## **Trustworthiness**

In order to assess trustworthiness of the study, I have worked to identify and be transparent with my own assumptions, biases, and relationship to the study that could have affected my interpretations. Care was taken to include a review of my interpretations and analysis with peers in education. Additionally, peer reviews were conducted of the data and the write-up of findings in order to assess the interpretations of the data for bias and meaning.

Another element related to the trustworthiness of the study came from conducting a thorough review of the literature and having experts from the field of education review my interpretations (Morrow, Lecture 2). A graduate student was asked to review my interpretation and analysis by providing them with a copy of the coding frame to code and theme selected pieces of the data. I met with a group of educators to discuss pieces of collected data from the interview participants. They were asked to review selections of the interview narratives to see if the write-ups reflected the data before sending to participants for member checking. Further, Creswell's (2012) recommendations for data analysis and representation in qualitative research were followed in this study, including organizing the data into files; making notes in the margin to form initial codes, identifying and classifying codes and themes, and interpreting the data into the larger context of the story, as well as working to visualize the data (p. 190-191). Additional recommendations by Creswell and Merriam (2009) were used in this study, including a peer review of the research process, addressing researcher assumptions and bias throughout the entire process, and member checking (p. 251-252; p. 229).

## **Census Survey**

In order to work to provide trustworthiness to the survey portion of the study, it was important to make sure the questions were carefully worded and could be understood in the same manner by all participants (Fowler, 2014, p. 92). In a survey research course, I developed questions and shared with a group of fellow classmates to ensure the questions asked what they were intended to ask, or, if they did not, to learn how they could be worded differently. Sample size calculators were used to determine the number of needed responses at a 95% confidence level with a margin of error of 4.99. The total of number of needed responses was 385. The number of collected responses exceeded the number required to make claims about the participant group given the unknown total number of possible participants.

## **Interviews**

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the interview portion of the study, interview questions were created based on the literature review and questions asked in other interview surveys. After their creation, the questions on the interview screening protocol were checked with a team of fellow graduate students enrolled in a survey research course at the University of Tennessee to ensure the questions were worded in a manner, which allowed all participants to understand and answer the questions. Research questions were crosschecked with questions in the census survey, the interview screening protocol, and interview portions of the study to work to ensure data would be collected to answer each question.

Steps taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the interpretations of the interview data included triangulation and member checking (Hatch, 2002, p. 91-92). The transcripts of the interviews were member checked with the participants to ensure what they said was taken and represented as intended. One participant asked that information provided in her interview be stricken from the transcript of our phone interview as she did not feel that it was her information to share. Another participant asked that gender identifiers for her child's school administration be removed. Each request was honored.

After the data were analyzed and written up, respondents were contacted and asked to review the interpretations made by the researcher. As Merriam states, when participants read through your interpretation that is in your words and not theirs, they should be able to recognize their experiences and perspectives in the interpretation (p. 217). Participant feedback was positive. One participant specifically stated that after she adjusted to being referred to by her pseudonym, she was able to hear her voice in the data. Another participant noted that she had attended school board meetings not met with school board members as written in the narrative. This change to the narrative was made.

Other steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the study by attending to the level of engagement between the researcher and the analysis. A reflective journal was maintained throughout the study to establish rigor in the process and serve as an audit trail of all steps completed in the study, as well as any decisions made that could have affected the analysis (Merriam, 2002, p. 222). There were multiple cycles of coding to continue checking and rechecking the data with thoughtful reflection continually happening and being documented throughout the analysis to acknowledge any unwanted

biases (Yin, 2011; Merriam, 1998, p. 204-205). Additionally, care was taken to write up the interpretations of the census survey data and the interview data in order to provide “rich, thick descriptions” of the participants’ lived experiences with standardized assessments and the opt out movement (Glesne, 2011, p. 49).

### **Data Cleaning**

As Morrow (Lecture 8) stated, “With qualitative data you need to decide how much ‘cleaning’ of the data you will do prior to addressing your hypotheses/research questions.” The privacy and protection of participants is of the utmost importance in qualitative research. The participants have trusted the researcher to follow through with the promises made to them to maintain confidentiality and/or anonymity. For this reason, it was imperative to handle the data with care and present the findings in a manner that considered the participants’ wishes. Any information pertaining to identities was sanitized to ensure that the participants would not be identified. Additionally, when the interview transcripts were member checked with participants, two of the participants requested things to be omitted in the transcripts or omitted from the writing of the narratives. These changes were honored.

### **Reflexivity**

The lenses through which I viewed and designed my study are reflective of the identities I hold as a mom, teacher, and scholar. As a mother of a child affected by test anxiety, I was moved to conduct research seeking to listen and share the lived experiences other families have had with standardized assessments. It was also in my role as a mother that I wanted to hear the effects testing mandates have had on children and

their teachers. I am passionate in my feeling that their stories have value and need to be heard on a larger scale.

As a teacher of elementary school children, I wanted to know how schools have responded to the testing mandates that have been directed from state departments of education and how parents view their children's educational programs. As a teacher, I was interested in the high stakes attached to different standardized assessments and how these high stakes have been passed onto students and other teachers. I have seen first-hand the effects standardized assessments have had on students and the stress the high stakes can cause in students, families, or teachers. Thus, I am interested in the experiences others have had in this area.

As a scholar, I wanted to conduct research on individuals who have been affected by standardized testing and provide them with a research platform to voice how they feel, and how they have been affected by their experiences with standardized assessments. I wanted to know how the opt out movement is occurring across the United States and to sketch a picture of some of the individuals who are participating in this movement. Both my professional role as a teacher and my role as a scholar have helped shape the knowledge I have of the standardized assessments in U.S. public schools and the philosophies I hold regarding what I think K-12 assessment should entail. My role as a mother shaped my desire to make sure others who have been affected by standardized assessments were able to share their experiences.

It is evident how I feel about standardized assessments based on information I have shared regarding my own family's experience with standardized assessments and



what I have witnessed when administering standardized assessments to my own students. Effort has been made throughout the study to be up front about my feelings and to be reflective throughout the research process of how these feelings could have affected the analysis of the data or the work I have done throughout the research process. I worked hard to ensure my participants' voices were heard in their narratives by using their own words and their experiences as they reported them to me. In order to monitor my own thoughts and feelings, a reflective journal was kept throughout the research process to record my reactions to things participants shared or things that came up in the study.

### **Ethics and Politics**

An ethical issue I was aware of throughout the study and will continue to be cognizant of relates to the level of confidentiality promised to all willing and conducted interview participants. Each individual who completed an interview protocol was labeled with a corresponding number in order of completion and group printout. All identifying information, such as their given names or name of the school their child attended, was voided from their printed interview protocols. Once selected for an interview, the participants were given pseudonyms. The pseudonyms and participant list were kept separate from the data binders. Once assigned, the pseudonyms were used in my ongoing analysis and will continue to be used throughout the reporting of the data. Although the interviews were audio-recorded with a digital voice recorder for transcription purposes, the audio files were deleted once the transcription was member checked with participants. All electronic study data is kept on a password-protected home computer operated solely

by the researcher and all printed study data was kept in a locked file cabinet with the key kept in a separate location.

Another potential ethical issue relates to the access of potential participants to participate in the study. Efforts were made to ensure all interested participants were able to participate. As this study involves participants having access to a computer or other internet connected device in order to complete the web-based census survey and the web-based interview protocol, potential participants were made aware that a printed copy of the survey could be sent to them if they preferred to complete an offline version. Similarly, some potential participants were initially contacted via the social networking site Facebook. Efforts were made to allow individuals to share the survey with individuals who may have wished to participate but who were not on Facebook.

### **Qualtrics as Data Collection & Data Analysis Tool**

Students of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK) have access to software and hardware offered for free through the university's Office of Informational Technology (OIT) department. Qualtrics was the online program used for the creation of the census survey and interview screening protocols. In addition to the researcher, this program was used as both the data collection and data analysis tool for the study.

I met with an OIT staff member who is a Qualtrics specialist. We met at the start of the study to work on survey design. We met again before the census survey was sent out to ensure it met the requirements as promised to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. We met one additional time after surveys started being collected as a review of program elements to assist with the data analysis phase of the study. During the

meeting, I shared some elements of the program that were of concern to me to determine if they were user or program error to determine the potential impact on the census survey.

This section of chapter three outlines the use of Qualtrics within this study. It begins with a description of census survey and interview screening protocol durations and the completion status to determine response and completion rates.

### **Census Survey Duration and Completion Status**

Using a reporting tool in Qualtrics, one can see a snapshot of when the study participants completed the survey and how long it took them to complete the survey. According to the outline of the study provided to participants, the projected time needed to complete the census survey was no more than 20 minutes. The majority of participants (approximately 250) took 10 minutes to complete the census survey. Another group of 130 participants took approximately 20 minutes and about 35 participants took approximately 30 minutes. A few participants took between 40 minutes to an hour to complete the survey. According to information in the report, the census survey took some participants between 1-3 hours to complete. As the survey allowed participants to return to complete it at a later time, it is unclear if the participants were engaged in the survey for this duration or if they returned to the survey after a break. A larger number of participants completed the survey between 3:00-9:00 pm than at any other time of the day.

Qualtrics also provided information regarding which question was the last one completed by the participants. 380 participants of the census survey made it to the last question regarding their consent to learn more about the interview portion of the survey

by being taken to the interview screening protocol. 6 participants completed the question just prior to this providing them the opportunity to share anything about standardized assessments they wanted. 36 participants stopped participating after they provided information regarding their ethnicity. 20 other participants stopped participating after providing their consent to participate in the study.

### **Interview Screening Protocol Duration and Completion Status**

Using a reporting tool in Qualtrics, information was also provided regarding how participants completed the interview screening protocol for the study. It indicated the length of time it took participants to complete the interview screening protocol, the percentage of the protocol questions completed by participants, and the last question participants completed. Of the 133 participants who completed the interview screening protocol, 108 completed the protocol with at least a 60% completion rate. A larger number of participants completed the interview screening protocol between 6:00am-12:00 pm than at any other time of the day. The average number of participants took 21 minutes to complete the screening protocol. The 25 participants who did not complete the screening stopped at the consent question. One of the participants stopped after the item asking if they faced any obstacles when opting out of testing and another participant stopped after answering what obstacles they faced when opting out. 106 participants stopped participating after providing their contact information in the last question. Of the 108 participants who agreed to complete the interview screening protocol and possibly be contacted for an interview, 2 participants completed the survey, but did not provide the contact information needed in order to set up the interviews if selected.

## Chapter Summary

This study was a descriptive study of the effects of standardized assessments on some families and why some individuals are choosing to participate in the opt out movement. A national web-based census survey was sent out to members of social media groups designated for individuals who are participating in the opt out movement in some form, i.e. learning more about the opt out movement or opting their families out of standardized assessments. Individuals who are known to be active in the opt out movement were also asked via email to share the survey link to individuals who they were aware may be interested in sharing their experiences. Participants of the census survey were asked if they were interested in possibly being contacted for follow-up interviews to share more information regarding their experiences with standardized assessments or in opting their children out of standardized testing. Of the willing interview participants, they were asked if they were willing to share any artifacts they felt would add to the description of their experiences. Careful analysis of all data collected was performed continually throughout the study in order to focus on all aspects of standardized assessments and participation in the opt out movement as shared by this pool of participants. In chapter 4, the findings of this study are presented as a description of these participants and what experiences they have had with standardized assessments and the opt out movement. In chapter 5, the 8 interview narratives are provided to share each interviewee's account of their experiences with standardized assessments and their participation in the opt out movement. In chapter 6, a discussion of the study is provided with the findings of the study reviewed, implications for all stakeholders involved with

standardized assessments and the opt out movement, and ideas for future research, as well as my reflection of the study.

## **Chapter 4: Census Findings and Discussion**

This chapter begins with a description of some of the participants of the opt out movement who participated in this study by sharing their experiences with standardized assessments and the opt out movement. Next, I discuss the patterns and themes in family experiences with standardized assessment and the opt out movement supported with quotes provided in participant responses to questions in the census survey.

This study was conducted in the spring semester of the 2015-2016 school year, between March 14 and May 14. A web-based census survey was sent out nationally via social media using the online survey program Qualtrics. Census survey participants were asked to complete an online interview screening protocol if they were willing to further participate in the study by being interviewed. 12 individuals were selected for further participation in the study based on representation of different parts of the United States and varied experiences with standardized testing and the opt out movement. Ultimately, 8 interviews were conducted.

The descriptive interview portion of the study allowed me to dive deeply into a relatively new area of education reform in order to better understand and expand on the experiences this study's participants have had with standardized assessment and who is choosing to participate in the opt out movement as reflected in this study. Through careful analysis of data from the census survey, interview screening protocols, interview transcripts, artifacts, and the researcher's reflective journal, I attempted to write detailed narratives that portrayed my participants' experiences and feelings in order to answer the research questions that were the focus of my study. These questions were:

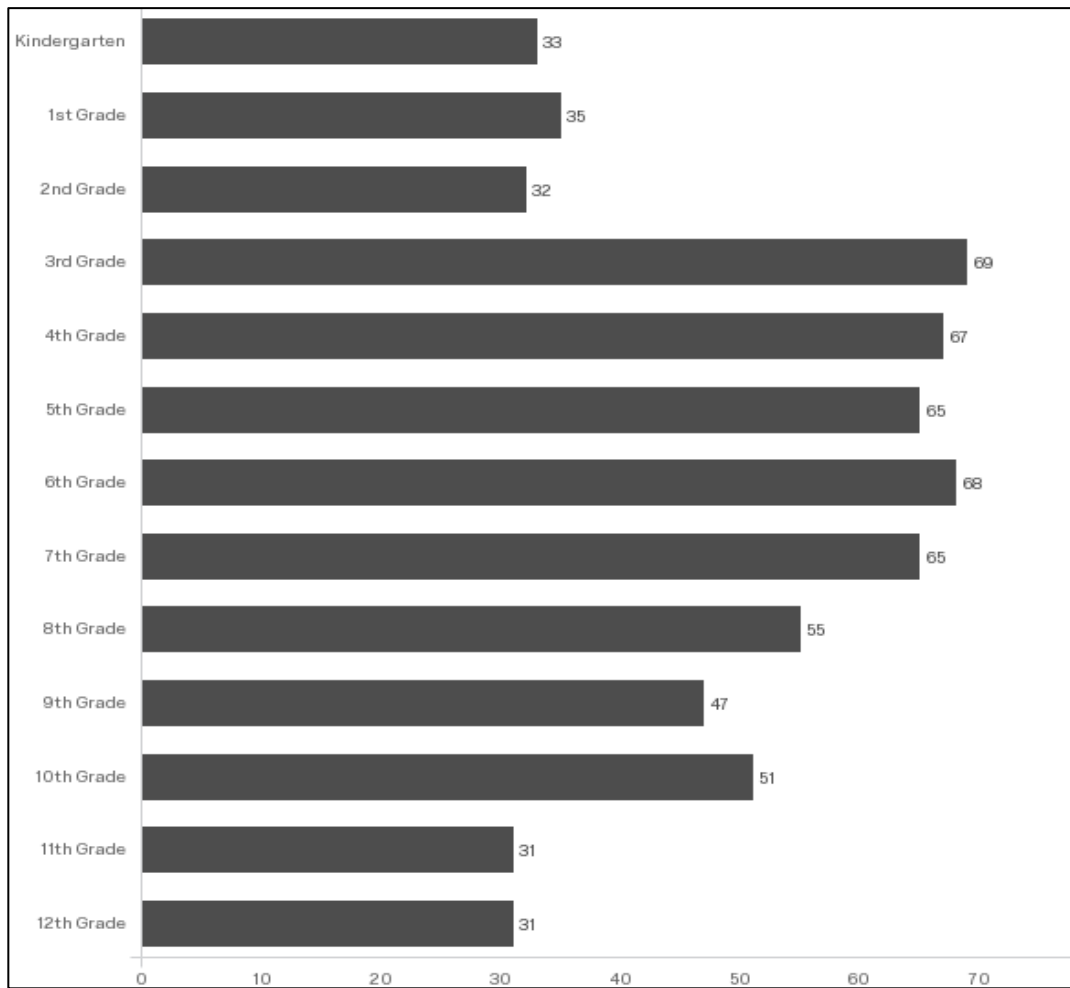
1. Who are some of the individuals who are participating in the opt out movement?
2. How are some individuals making the decision to participate in the opt out movement?
  - a. What knowledge do these individuals who are participating in the opt out movement have regarding the assessments that their children are being given in public schools?
  - b. How have these individuals who are participating in the opt out movement been affected by the standardized assessments being given in public schools?

In this chapter, I present key findings from the data shared in the census survey. The survey was set up so that individuals could skip any questions they chose, so not all sets of responses add up to the total number of participants in a given category or in the survey itself. 421 completed at least 95% of the items. These data are organized below into presentations of demographics, effects of testing on children, and experiences with opting out.

### **Who Participated in the Census?**

The first two census questions asked about current enrollment of participants' children and their perspective on how much testing takes place in their children's schools. 350 of the 421 participants had a child or children in K-12 schools when they completed the survey. Of these, 236 had children at the primary/elementary grade level (kindergarten-fourth grade), 253 at the middle school level (fifth-eighth grade), and 160 at the secondary/high school level (ninth-twelfth grade) (See Figure 4.1).





**Figure 4. 1 Grade Levels of Participants' Children**

The overwhelming majority of these participants (324) reported that they think too many tests are given in their children’s schools. 24 participants felt like the amount of tests given was the right number and 2 participants preferred not to answer. There was not a single participant that indicated they thought K-12 schools were giving too few standardized assessments.

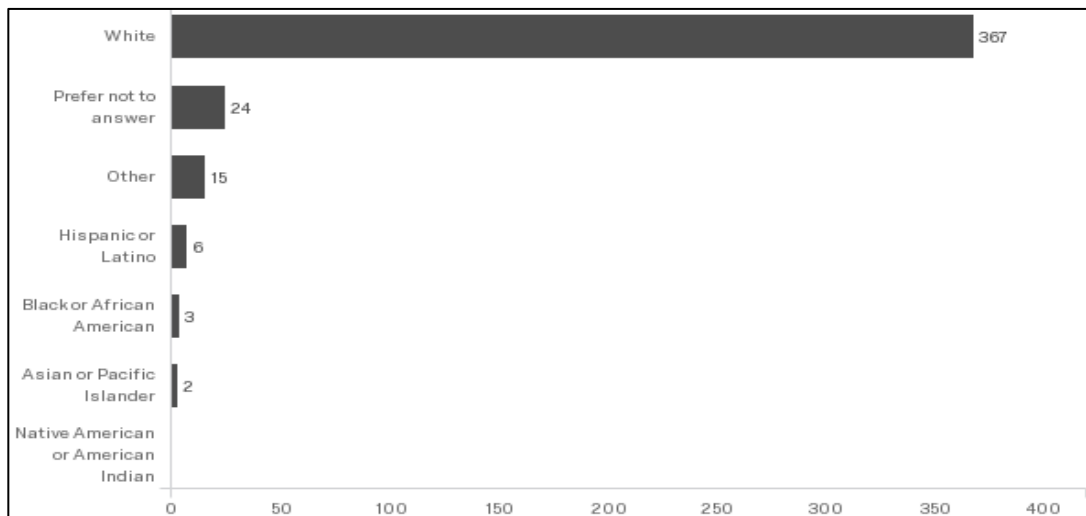
Nine demographic items allowed further description of the participant sample for individuals in this study. 374 participants were female, 35 were male, and 7 preferred not to answer. The majority of participants were 46+ years old. Table 4.1 provides a breakdown of the 416 participants who reported their ages:

**Table 4.1 Participant Age Range**

<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Responses</b>
18-24	3
25-31	10
32-38	88
39-45	148
46+	163
Prefer Not to Answer	4

Although there was a mix of ethnic backgrounds represented among the participants, the overwhelming majority identified as white. There were 367 participants identified as white, with progressively smaller numbers selecting Hispanic or Latino, black or African American, Asian or Pacific Islander, and other (See Figure 4.2). The participants identifying their ethnicity as ‘other’ predominantly identified themselves or

their children as bi-racial. There were 24 additional participants who preferred not to answer, and a few individuals who stated they were either ‘American’ or ‘Human’.

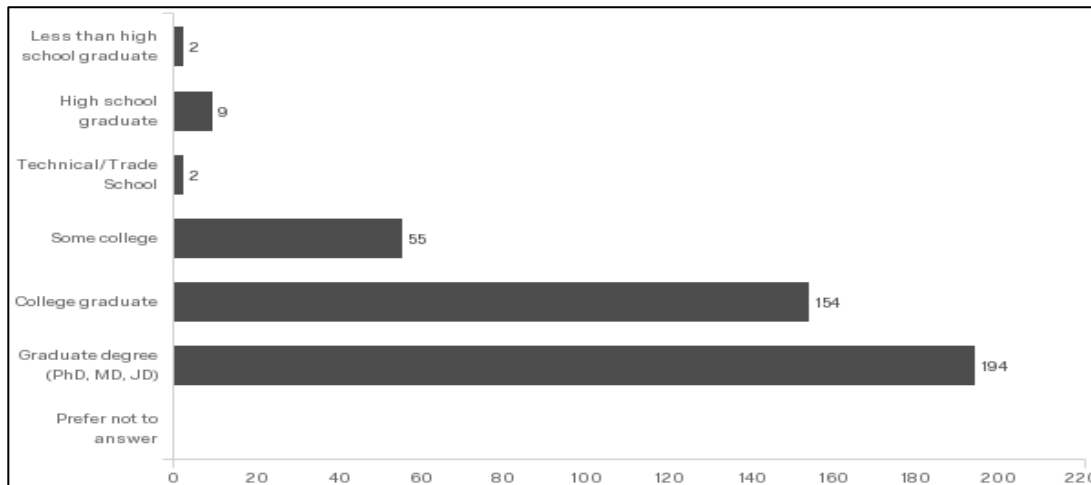


**Figure 4.2 Participant Ethnicity**

Most (263) of the participants of this study held a full-time job. Although 68 participants were employed part-time, 55 stated they were not employed. An additional 27 individuals preferred not to answer this question. This information was followed up with a question seeking the household income of the participants in the census survey. 316 participants stated that their household income was above \$50K, 22 had a household income of \$50K and 43 were below \$50K. Another 33 individuals preferred not to answer.

The participants were asked about their level of educational experience, their employment status, and their household income level. The majority of participants held at

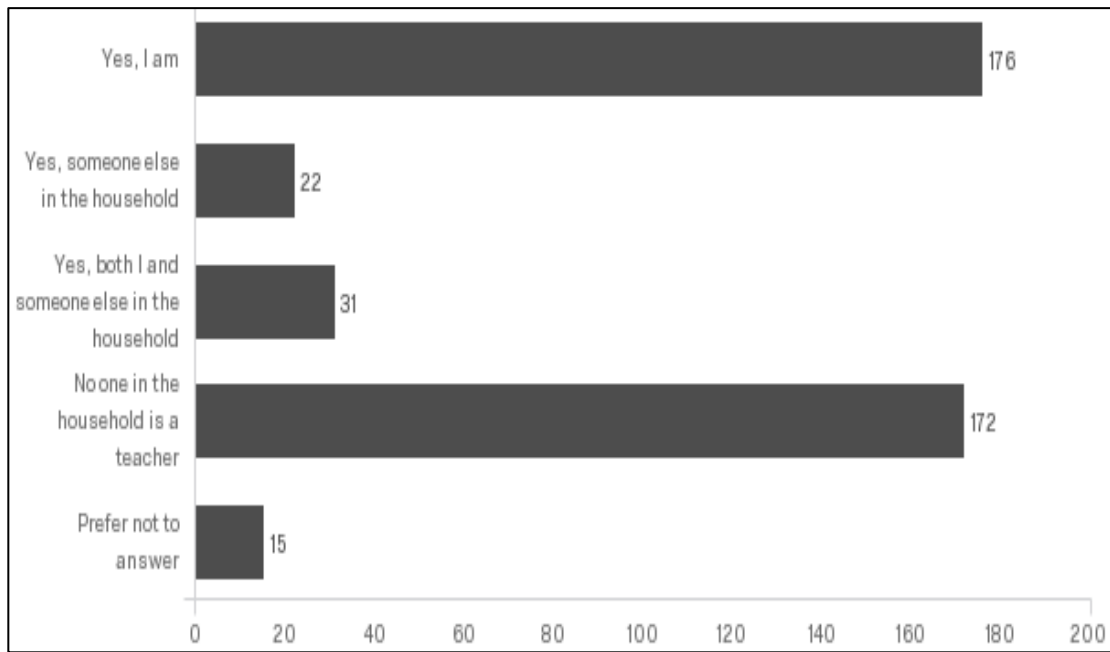
least a college degree, with 194 having a graduate degree as well. Figure 4.3 provides a breakdown of the information reported by participants about their educational experience.



**Figure 4.3 Participant Education Level**

One of the demographic questions in the census survey asked participants where they lived. Although the majority of the 414 participants that answered this question identified the area in which they lived as suburban (254), 38% reported living in either urban (60) or rural areas (96). 5 participants preferred not to answer.

Because educators are affected professionally as well as personally by the issues surrounding standardized assessments, census survey participants were asked if anyone in their household was an educator. As seen in Figure 4.4, 55% of participating households contained at least one educator.



**Figure 4.4 Educator Participants**

### Effects of Testing on Children

Questions 3, 4, and 5 of the census survey asked participants if they had noticed changes to their children’s mental or physical wellness, or signs of test anxiety, in the weeks leading up to testing. Responses of "yes" led to follow-up open-ended items asking for descriptions of what parents had observed. The following presents the numbers of parents who identified changes or anxiety, and is followed by presentations of the three categories (Table 4.2).

**Table 4.2 Participants’ Identified Changes in Their Children**

<b>Effects of Testing on Child(ren)</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Prefer Not to Answer</b>
Mental Wellness	262	78	9
Physical Wellness	172	166	10
Test Anxiety	217	120	11

#### **Mental Wellness**

75% of the participants who chose to respond to this item noticed changes in their child’s mental wellness in the weeks leading up to testing. They gave many examples of the effects that they believe standardized assessments were having on their child’s mental wellness, such as the participant who responded “My youngest child develops severe anxiety that results in meltdowns, screaming, crying, etc. at school. No child should ever feel like crying at school. I had to go to school to work with him to help calm him down.”

Participants in this study noticed changes in their children's appetites, such as their having trouble eating or having a desire to over eat. Participants reported changes in

sleep patterns that included elementary aged children starting to wet the bed although there was no physical reason for it. Others noted personal changes in their child, such as having meltdowns or becoming argumentative.

Many of these 262 participants shared stories of changes in their child's mental well being related to their child having increased amounts of stress or anxiety. 111 participants reported how stressed these tests have made their child, and 123 shared information regarding the increased anxiety their child was displaying. One participant shared that her child was diagnosed with an anxiety disorder and had to spend time working with a therapist to develop strategies to compensate for feelings of anxiety in test taking situations. This mother reported that the therapist told her an increasing number of children were being recommended for stays in pediatric psychiatric hospitals; the therapist attributed this to the increase of testing; the pressure children are faced with in schools regarding the high stakes associated with these assessments; and a lack of play or downtime in the school environment. Her child has had two stays in the pediatric psychiatric hospital in the last three years.

Participants shared many examples of the emotional changes their children exhibited in the weeks leading up to testing, including increased episodes of irritability in which they appeared to be on edge. Children were easily agitated much of the time and had frequent crying spells that appeared to happen for no apparent reason. One participant shared an example of how extreme the mental changes can be that children exhibit in response to the standardized assessments being given:

*My son has always had a buildup of emotional outbursts over the last few weeks prior to testing. By the time the date arrives, he is wound up like a clock and extremely volatile. Two years ago, I circled the school after dropping him off and I ran into the office to warn them about his emotional state. I was concerned that he could be dangerous, but he is ordinarily a sweet, kind of geeky kid. That was the last year that I allowed him to take the test. It was not worth it.*

Participants also reported increased instances of negative self talk. This came in the form of verbally expressing low esteem by calling themselves dumb or stupid. The children showed signs of low self-esteem, feeling defeated, and doubting their ability. Although the question asked about changes in the weeks leading up to testing, one participant responded,

*It's probably less about the weeks leading up to testing and more about during. Testing days are exhausting for them, especially for my ADHD son. He's crankier than normal, and as he struggles with the tests, it seems like his self-esteem takes a hit every time that he goes through another testing cycle. He never feels like he did well on them.*

This participant's story was not an uncommon thread in the data. Other participants talked about how cranky and irritable their children were and how their children express negative views of themselves. One participant reported serious negative effects on how a student views himself and his school:

*He misses numerous days due to feelings of failure. He does not test well and he feels like he's dumb. He has learned that the kids who do not test well are*



*considered dumb or not worth the effort due to his placement in the back of the room by his teachers. School is not important to him anymore.*

Overall themes and the breakdown of In Vivo codes addressed in the participants' open-ended responses to the prompt, "If yes, how has your child's mental wellness changed?" are displayed in Table 4.3.

**Table 4.3 Changes in Mental Wellness**

<b>Overall Topics</b>	<b>Breakdown/In Vivo Codes</b>
Change in Appetite	Trouble Eating, Skipped Meals, Over Eating, Eats Less, Loss of Appetite
Change in Sleep Patterns	Trouble Sleeping, Bed Wetting, Sleep Walking, Talking in Sleep, Exhaustion, Mental Fatigue
Emotional Changes	Crying, Frustration, Whiney, Cranky, Anger, Meltdown, Increased Irritability, Edge, Depressed, Grouchy, Short Temper, Outbursts, Moodiness, Sad, Moody
Harming Self	Banging Head, Nail Biting, Pull Out Eyelashes, Pull Out Hair
Increased Anxiety/Stress/Worry	Nervous, Test Effects, Computer Failure, Pressure, Overwhelmed, Content, Loss of Instruction, Retention, General Worry, Performance, Grades
Negative Self Talk	Feelings of Failure, Worthless, Loser, Stupid, Bad Brain, Doubt Ability, Critical, Dumb, Defeated, Less Confident, Decreased Self Esteem
Personal Change	Confusion, Acting Out, Withdrawn, Back Talk, Decreased Interest in School, Behavior Issues, Lack of Focus, Meltdowns, Request to Homeschool, Off Task
Stomach Issues	Throw Up, Upset Stomach, Stomach Pains, Stomachaches, Nausea, Bowel Issues, Vomiting, Puking, Stomach Issues with Fever, Diarrhea
Other	Excitement Over No Homework, Increased ADD Episodes, Headaches Relief Over Opt Out, Migraines

A concern for many participants was the increased amount of stomach issues that affected their child. These involved the students saying they had stomachaches, bowel issues, and episodes of vomiting. Some of the participants reported their child developed diarrhea and general upset stomachs. Responses such as this lead into the next area of effect that standardized assessments have on some children: changes to their physical wellness.

## Physical Wellness

49% of the participants who responded to this question reported noticing a change in their child's physical wellness. 48% reported not noticing a change, and 3% preferred not to answer. In response to the prompt, "If yes, how has your child's physical wellness changed?" the topics addressed by participants included change in appetite, change in sleep patterns, emotional changes, harming self, increased occurrences of illnesses, personal changes, stomach issues, and other examples. Figure 4.5 is a content cloud created in Tagxedo. The most prominent words are the words of the highest frequency as discussed by participants describing changes in the physical wellness of their children.

Participants reported that in some instances, the child became more clingy or started showing a lack of interest in participating in family or school activities. They also displayed increased occurrences of illnesses. Children would report to their parents that they did not want to attend school or they would display flu-like symptoms. Some participants' children developed signs of a weakened immune system and increased upper respiratory infections. They also had increased occurrences of headaches and some children developed migraines.

One of the participants in the study shared a story of how the changes in the child's physical wellness affected the child on test day:

*Throwing up, one of my children felt sick in class during one of the tests and asked to be excused because she was about to throw up. The teacher instead brought a garbage can, because since the test was being administered, she couldn't leave the room. This is disgusting!*



As displayed in Table 4.4, some participants shared examples of how the children were harming themselves in response to testing. One wrote, “He was so concerned about the testing in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, he would twist his hair absentmindedly. He eventually gave himself a huge bald spot.” Another participant shared her experience with her son being so stressed about the tests she would have to pick him up as soon as testing was over because he was so exhausted and overloaded. She opted him out after that and he has not taken a test since. The same participant shared how standardized testing affects her adopted daughter who has a neurodevelopmental disorder:

*I considered allowing her to test last year in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Then, I received a call from the school stating that during the practice exam, she had started banging her head repeatedly on her desk and was calling herself a loser. She proceeded to pull her own eyelashes out. I immediately opted her out of state tests and practice exams.*

**Table 4.4 Changes in Physical Wellness**

<b>Overall Topics</b>	<b>Breakdown/In Vivo Codes</b>
Change in Appetite	Binge Eating, Increased Appetite, Decreased Appetite, Junk Food, Cravings
Change in Sleep Patterns	Sleep Walking, Talking in Sleep, Wakes Up Frequently, Nightmares, Trouble Falling Asleep, Lack of Sleep
Emotional Changes	Fear of Failure, Crying, Angry, Moody
Harming Self	Nail Biting, Hair Pulling, Lip Picking
Increased Occurrence of Illnesses	Flu-Like Symptoms, Strep, Headaches, Migraines, Upper Respiratory Infections, Weak Immune System
Personal Change	Quiet, Not Smiling, Withdrawn, Less Patient, Lack of Motivation, Lack of Interest, Clingy, Bored, Lack of Focus, Weight Gain, Change in Attitude, Less Active, Decreased Interest in School
Stomach Issues	Diarrhea, Stomachaches, Feeling Sick, Vomiting, Dry Heaving, Throwing Up
Other	Rashes, Dizziness, Panic Attacks, Vision Problems, Nervous Tics, Hives

### **Test Anxiety**

A large portion of respondents stated their child had consistently experienced test anxiety during the school year. Of the 349 participants who responded to this question, 62% (217) reported that their child had experienced test anxiety during the school year. 121 reported not seeing any signs of test anxiety in their child during the school year, and an additional 11 individuals preferred not to answer.

In response to the open-ended prompt, "If yes, what signs of test anxiety has your child experienced?" some participants shared their children had an increased display of negative behaviors, such as being disrespectful, having an attitude, becoming withdrawn, and task avoidance. They also shared their children struggled from having a lack of focus, freezing up, slow processing of familiar topics, and difficulty recalling information for tests even after having extra study sessions.

Some of the signs of test anxiety shared by the participants in this item are similar to behaviors already described in previous sections about mental and physical changes, and can be signs of general anxiety common to a lot of people in new or uncomfortable situations, such as nail biting and verbally expressing concern about the tests. However, some of the additional behaviors shared in this category were more extreme in nature.

One participant shared an example of how her stepdaughter reacted to the weekly progress monitoring she was expected to do as required by her school's Response to Intervention (RTI) plan. Each week the 2<sup>nd</sup> grader had to take the Star Reading Assessment from Renaissance, in order to document any progress she was making in the reading intervention program in which she was placed for Tier III instruction. For the 2<sup>nd</sup>

grader, the process was frustrating and made her feel stupid. She knew students pulled for other groups were the “smart” kids and because she was pulled for a different group, she must be “stupid.” She felt like she was worthless. On one of her progress monitoring days, she felt like the test was too hard and told the proctor she did not want to finish the test. She had her teacher call her grandmother to come get her. By the time her grandmother arrived, the little girl had plucked out all of her eyelashes. That was the first time she had hurt herself. During the same school year, the child started banging her head on the computer table as she became upset over the tests. On one occasion, she pulled out her eyelashes, and on another she pulled out hair on the top of her head.

The overall topics addressed by participants in response to this item were: anxiety, change in sleep patterns, emotional changes, harming self, negative self talk, personal change, and other (Table 4.5).

**Table 4.5 Signs of Test Anxiety**

<b>Overall Topics</b>	<b>Breakdown/In Vivo Codes</b>
Anxiety	Feeling Pressured, Dread, Obsessing, Stress, Overwhelmed, Nervous, Verbally Express Concern, Worry
Change in Sleep Patterns	Restless, Exhaustion
Emotional Changes	Scared, Worry, Agitation, Sulking, Grumpy, Short Temper, Crying, Depression, Irritable, Cranky, Meltdowns
Harming Self	Nail Biting, Picking Lips, Head Banging, Picking at Self, Plucking Eyelashes, Hair Pulling
Negative Self Talk	Feelings of Failure, Feeling Stupid, Self Bashing, Hates Himself
Other	Chewing on Things, Forgetfulness, Trouble Breathing, Rashes, Rapid Heart Beat, Shaking, Sweaty Palms, Fidget, Need Accommodations, Hives, Hyperactivity, Panic, Headaches, Migraines, Change in Appetite
Personal Change	Task Avoidance, Isolation, Disrespectful, Clingy, Lack of Physical Activity, Panic, Lack of Focus, Freeze Up, Behavior Problems, Attitude, Slow Processing, Rushing, Extra Studying, Shut Down, Withdrawn, Decreased Interest in School

Another behavior reported in this section was children's use of negative self-talk. These children were upset with themselves over how participating in the assessments made them view and feel about themselves. Participants shared their children had feelings of failure, bashed themselves, called themselves stupid, and talked about hating themselves. One educator in the study gave an example of a conversation she had with her son, which was the catalyst for her advocacy against standardized assessments:

*Three years ago, I picked up my child from elementary school. He was in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. When I asked him how his day was, I hoped to hear that he learned a new song, or a new game, or read a funny poem, or watched the class pet running in its cage. But instead, he looked at me angrily and said, "Today I learned that I am stupid, because I can't pass those stupid tests." From that moment on my vision was clear. I will do all I can, knowing that my very job could be jeopardized, to spread the word that these tests are toxic.*

Comparisons were made between the individuals who stated their children experienced test anxiety and demographic information shared by the participants. The majority of individuals reported their children exhibited signs of test anxiety had household family incomes above \$50K. This data may not be that surprising as most of the individuals participating in the census survey self identified as having a household income level above \$50K. The same observation can be made regarding the identification of test anxiety symptoms in the children from white families. Although the majority of participants stated their children experienced test anxiety consistently during the school year were white, the vast majority of participants in the census survey portion of the

study self-identified as white. Homes with educators (50.23%) were almost as likely as homes without educators (45.62%) to report that their children experienced test anxiety. These comparisons were made in order to add to the level of description of the participants in this study and were no way intended to be a generalization of all of the participants involved in the opt out movement or with experiences with standardized assessments.

In addition to information shared by participants regarding changes in their child's mental and physical wellness that were also present in the participants' responses regarding signs of test anxiety, there was a difference in the observation of the types of personal changes in the child made that were related to test anxiety. Participants shared their children had an increased display of negative behaviors, such as being disrespectful, having an attitude, becoming withdrawn, and task avoidance. They also shared that their children struggled from having a lack of focus, freezing up, slow processing of even familiar topics, and difficulty recalling information for tests even after having extra study sessions.

### **Census Survey Participants' Experiences With The Opt Out Movement**

The next portion of Phase I of the study involved asking study participants about their families' experiences with the opt out movement. Participants were asked if they were provided with information on any possible options available to them regarding the testing of their child. As initial recruitment for participants for this study was made by posting study information on social media groups focused on learning about the opt out movement or groups opposed to the standardized assessments being given in their child's



schools, the question was asked how these participants received information on the opt out movement. Participants were asked if they chose to opt out of standardized assessments and why they made that decision for their family. Of the participants who made the decision to opt out of standardized assessments, they were asked if they faced any obstacles when trying to opt their child out and if they noticed being treated any differently for opting out. This information was used in part to answer the research question regarding what knowledge participants have about assessments being given to their children and how they are making the decision to participate in the opt out movement.

### **Knowledge of Test Options**

The next portion of the census survey looked at the information participants provided relating to their participation in the opt out movement and their experiences with their child's school. Of 350 participants, the majority were not made aware of available options in the testing of their child or given the choice to not test. Although 290 census survey participants had no options made available to them, 55 stated they were provided options in the school's testing of their child. An additional 5 individuals preferred not to answer this prompt.

Although the majority of participants in the study stated the school did not make them aware of any available options, 55 participants shared the schools' responses to their request to opt their child out of testing or the participants provided examples of options made available to their families during testing windows. Some schools provided parents with information on the standardized tests being given and made parents aware of

the testing schedules. When parents informed the school of their plan to opt out, they were given directions on who they should contact regarding their decision to opt out or given directions on the correct way to submit the request. In a few instances, participants who sent an email to the school administration or teacher were told they needed to write a letter. If a request was only sent to the principal, some individuals were told to also contact the district superintendent. Other participants were simply allowed to turn in an opt out form to the office staff and were not required to do anything else.

As displayed in Table 4.6, the majority of participants in this study stated that no options were made available to them. Of the 55 participants receiving options in the assessment of their children, 51 of them were married. 50 of the participants were college graduates and 22 of those held graduate degrees. For the employment status of study participants receiving test options for their children, 36 individuals held a full-time job and 48 participants reported household incomes above \$50K. The 38 study participants living in suburban areas also had options made available to them. In terms of ethnicity, the white participants overwhelmingly had options made available to them in comparison to participants of other ethnic backgrounds. Although none of this information is meant to generalize to the entire population of participants of the opt out movement happening across the United States, it adds to the description of the individuals participating in this study who were given test options.

In most of the cases, participants were told different versions of the same scenario regarding what their child would be able to do while the standardized assessment was being given in the building.

**Table 4.6 Available Testing Options Based on Demographic Information**

Demographic Category	Demographic Subcategories	Options Available	Options Not Available
Married	Married	51	241
	Living as Married/Co-Habiting	1	1
	Separated	0	2
	Divorced	2	21
	Widowed	0	2
	Never Married	1	9
Education Level	Less Than High School Graduate	1	1
	High School Graduate	0	6
	Technical/Trade School	0	2
	Some College	4	4
	College Graduate	28	109
	Graduate Degree (PhD, MD, JD)	22	129
Employment Status	Full-Time	36	181
	Part-Time	6	52
	Not Employed	7	37
Income Bracket	Below \$50K	2	26
	\$50K	0	19
	Above \$50K	48	223
Residential Area	Urban	5	43
	Suburban	38	178
	Rural	12	66
Ethnicity	White	52	251
	Hispanic or Latino	0	5
	Black or African American	0	3
	Native American or American Indian	0	0
	Asian or Pacific Islander	1	1
	Other	1	1

The majority of participants were told if their child was present in school, they would either have to sit and stare or sit in isolation while the other students were testing. Some students were given the option to read while sitting in the testing room or while they were sitting in isolation.

There were other options made available to a limited number of individuals. Some participants shared their children were assigned to work in other classrooms that were not being tested at the same time as the student's class or grade. This work may have included working with younger children or completing alternate assignments. For a few of the children with Individualized Education Plans (IEP), their parents expressed a decision to opt out of testing to their child's school and their schools requested the parents meet with the child's IEP team to discuss their decision. For some, the school worked with the parent to include additional allowable accommodations for the students in order to limit the effects of the tests on the children or they were provided alternative testing paths, such as portfolio assessments. Others were simply told there would be no consequences to the child for opting out of testing and were given support of the principal or other school staff. Two participants shared that informational meetings were held at their children's schools concerning their parental right to opt their children out of state standardized tests and families were given advice on how to opt out.

However, several of participants in the study shared less friendly options being given to them by the school or district. Upon informing the school they decided to opt their child out of testing, they were told opting out was not an option. Teachers in the school or administrators told the participants if they did not want their child to take the

standardized tests they would be required to keep their child at home during testing windows. Some of those participants were told if their child came to school late, they would not be given make-up tests when they returned. Others were told if their children were present at any time during the school day during the testing windows they would be given the assessment. If they informed the school of their choice to keep their children home during testing windows, participants were threatened with truancy letters for excessive absences.

In a few instances, the children who were sent to school during testing windows were required to inform their teachers or the test proctors themselves they were refusing the test. Parental request to opt out was not recognized. In addition to receiving no option threats, the participants in this study were told if they were not going to allow their children to participate in the curriculum/assessment chosen by the school, they should remove their child from the school and homeschool them.

### **Opt Out Information/Resources**

In response to the prompt, ‘How did you learn about the opt out movement?’ the participants of this study listed many ways in which they acquired their knowledge. The majority of participants learned about the opt out movement by doing independent research either for personal or professional reasons about their options or rights in the testing of their children. Their independent research included reaching out on social media pages devoted to parental advocacy against testing or from pages related to other forms of education advocacy, such as BATS, SPEAK, and homeschool sites. Participants also predominantly received information via word of mouth from family, friends, co-



Although the majority of participants shared information in their responses regarding how they learned about the opt out movement, 15 participants stated they did not know there was a movement or simply stated they were previously unaware.

### **Decision to Opt Out**

Participants of this study were asked if they chose to opt their child out of testing followed up with open-ended questions as to why they made the choice that they made. Of the 350 participants who answered this question, 135 participants have not opted their child out of testing and 209 indicated they did opt their children out of standardized assessments. An additional 6 individuals preferred not to answer this question.

In response to the prompt ‘Have you opted your child out of testing?’, participants were asked their reasons for the decision they made regarding their child’s participation in standardized testing. In regards to individuals choosing to opt their children out, the reasons given were related to their family’s individual experiences with standardized assessment and their response to issues with standardized testing in the educational settings.

The six overall topics given by participants as reasons for opting their children out of standardized testing are listed here in order of frequency in participant responses: research base/understanding of testing; effects on children; effects on the educational experience provided; purpose of the assessments; effects on the schools and teachers; and miscellaneous reasons.





178 were white and married. 175 participants held at least a college degree with 88 having a graduate degree as well. These participants predominantly hold a full-time job with a household income of above \$50K and live in the suburbs. In addition to this demographic information, participant responses indicated that there was almost an even match of participants choosing to opt their children out of standardized assessments from homes with educators (99) and homes without educators (101).

**Research Base.** In terms of the research base surrounding the testing currently happening in K-12 schools, participants showed an understanding of the policies and controversies surrounding the use of standardized assessments. For the participants that have chosen to opt their children out of standardized assessments, individuals discussed the lack of differentiation of standardized assessments and shared examples of children with individualized education plans (IEPs) being assessed with tests that were developmentally inappropriate for their age, grade or level of learning. Participants discussed the lack of teacher input in the design of most standardized assessments, the lack of transparency involved in the tests prohibiting teachers or students discussing the poor design of test questions encountered, and that best practices for testing elementary children have been ignored in the design of the assessments. Participants expressed a lack of faith in the assessments to accurately assess their children's academic ability and shared that they felt the tests were invalid. Additionally, participants shared their understanding of standardized tests being culturally and racially biased; the changing from year to year in test formats; and the determination of cut scores after the assessments had been given and checked for student performance.

**Table 4.7 Demographic Information of Opt Out Participants**

Demographics	Demographic Categories	Opted Out	Did Not Opt Out
Age Range	18-24	0	0
	25-31	3	1
	32-38	37	39
	39-45	81	39
	46+	87	39
Ethnicity	White	178	126
	Hispanic or Latino	3	2
	Black or African American	2	1
	Native American or American Indian	0	0
	Asian or Pacific Islander	1	1
	Other	9	2
Marital Status	Married	178	115
	Living as Married/Co-Habiting	5	4
	Separated	1	1
	Divorced	12	11
	Widowed	1	1
	Never Married	8	2
Education Level	Less Than High School Graduate	1	1
	High School Graduate	5	1
	Technical/Trade School	0	2
	Some College	28	19
	College Graduate	87	50
	Graduate Degree (PhD, MD, JD)	88	62
Employment Status	Full-Time	119	98
	Part-Time	45	12
	Not Employed	24	20
Income Bracket	Below \$50K	15	13
	\$50K	12	6
	Above \$50K	162	110
Residential Area	Urban	28	20
	Suburban	138	78
	Rural	41	37

A few participants also discussed the inability of the tests to accurately measure what they are intended to measure. One participant responded, “The education community needs to remember that essentially every test is a reading test first. The test sometimes misses the mark and tests if a student can read the words instead of testing a child’s content knowledge.”

**Effects on Children.** Participants were also highly concerned with the effects of testing on children. The participants were concerned with the direct effects standardized assessments had on their child, but in a lot of cases, they were concerned with the potential effects of testing on all children. They were concerned with the anxiety their child felt when preparing and taking these tests. One participant shared an experience with her daughter and the worry she had over standardized tests that led her to make the decision to opt her out. The participant shared, “My daughter was crying in the bathtub one night worried about her test scores a year and a half before she would even have to take it. The stress I see building in her and her classmates is unbelievable.” As she continued her response, she shared that she is the friend of three families who have asked for psychiatric referrals for their children in the weeks leading up to testing. One of the participants called the use of standardized assessments with children “legalized child abuse.” Another individual pointed to the decreased interest in school their child developed due to the instruction provided to them in response to the accountability movement. As the participant stated, “Both of my kids had extraordinary talent in math, but this test prep education ruined it for them. Nobody cared about their ideas.” In

addition to doing dozens of practice problems, the participant's children were upset that they were tested on things they had never been taught.

In addition to the effects on their own children, participants discussed the high stakes attached to standardized assessments for all children. Particularly, participants were concerned with the use of "one shot assessments" to determine students' promotion in grade levels, academic program placement, and graduation requirements. Participants felt as if these types of measures are being used to set children up to fail and label children for special education or funding purposes. Participants were also upset with the constant change in test formats and programs, which they feel has led to children sitting in today's classrooms being treated as if they are research subjects in experiments being conducted by testing corporations and privatization groups. One participant shared their opinion of this as the reason for why they have chosen to opt their children out.

*My child, a fifth grader, has been used as a guinea pig for numerous educational experiments with testing throughout his brief years of school. Almost every year, there has been something that is suppose to be better, but all have been inappropriate and not really about the children. They have been about testing/tech companies making money and 'reformers' using test scores to close public schools and open inferior charter schools.*

**Effects on the Educational Experience Provided.** There were participants who are choosing to opt their children out of standardized assessments based on the effects they believe the accountability movement is having on the educational experiences provided to children in schools across the United States. A couple of participants did not

like the “sterilization of schools during testing,” which happens as schools follow the assessment manuals for test administration such as taking away any educational resources the students have been taught with all year. One participant shared her opinion regarding the effects of standardized assessments on the educational experience being provided to children by sharing her family’s experience in this area.

*The educational experience should be adaptable to a child’s individual needs. I was told that my son needed help in math, because he was not as successful as other children. When I tried to get him the extra help he needed, I was told that he did not qualify unless he was diagnosed with ADHD. My son is dyslexic as are several other people in my family. I had to make them help us to know how to help improve.*

Other participants shared frustration over what they felt was a lack of developmentally appropriate assessments for the different levels of students in classrooms and a lack of differentiation in the curriculum the accountability movement requires of all students.

Participants discussed the effects they believe tests have on the instruction teachers are able to provide students. In particular, participants were upset over the expectations of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) they felt were developmentally inappropriate. Participants shared their thoughts that as teachers are feeling the pressure to raise test scores for evaluation purposes and merit pay they are feeling forced to “teach to the test” by focusing their lessons on test preparation.

Participants were also concerned over what they referred to as a narrowing of the curriculum by schools taking away enrichment activities; decreasing the instructional

time and focus provided for the content areas of science and social studies; and eliminating recess for some students.

**Purpose of the Assessments.** Another big issue for the participants in this study concerned their perceived purposes of the assessments being used in K-12 public schools across the United States. A few participants expressed frustration over the use of standardized tests to set students up to fail in order to use the test scores for privatization groups and testing corporations to open charter schools. One participant wrote, “My son has an IEP and is pulled out for reading and math...How can you give a child in resource classes the same test as a main stream child? It is an unfair test for a special needs child.” Another participant shared descriptions of her two children. One is on an individualized education plan (IEP) and performs well below grade level. The annual standardized assessment is above her child’s ability level and she is progress monitored weekly by her teachers. The participant does not want her child put through another failure, especially when she is already told weekly where her child is performing and how much progress is being made. Her other child is above grade level and performs “brilliantly on all academic work and tests.” She opts both of her children out of standardized assessments, because she is against holding children to the same standard. She stated, “They are all individuals. Learning should be at an individualized pace.”

For these participants and others, their children are working with educators on skills at their academic and developmental levels not their assigned grade level all year, but assessed using content that is developmentally inappropriate based on the child’s academic, age, and grade levels. They argue children, and by extension the teacher, are

being set up to fail by not being viewed or treated as individuals on the tests. They are not allowed to progress as slow or as fast as they are ready.

Other participants discussed their thoughts that the federal government was overstepping their bounds by “decreasing the local control” of state and county governments through initiatives such as Race to the Top (RTTT). Another key area of concern brought up by participants was the collection of student personal information and testing data by big corporations like Pearson. They expressed worry about students’ private data being shared with outside parties and privacy concerns such as identity theft.

**Effects on the Schools and Teachers.** The participants in this study brought up concerns throughout the study on the effects of standardized assessments on schools and teachers. In particular, participants choosing to opt their children out were worried about the high stakes use of test scores to determine the quality of teachers and schools. They expressed concern toward the use of test scores to provide funding for schools. Participants expressed understanding towards teachers feeling the need to teach to the test due to pressure put on them by politicians who have tied students’ test scores to teacher evaluations and merit pay.

Although a few participants in the study responded they understood a need for accountability measures to ensure all students were being provided the education they deserve, one participant stated if there is a need for accountability it should not end with educators. Her opinion was tied to the opinion of several other participants, who shared an understanding that standardized test scores most often directly reflect the demographics and home lives of the students in the school. The participant went on to

argue if accountability is needed for teachers then there is a need for accountability at all levels of education reform including accountability for politicians. The participant wrote, “Politicians need to be held accountable for the situations of their constituents, such as unemployment rates and crime rates.” The participant also argued for political knowledge regarding how much funding is spent per child per test and where additional money is being spent to address the needs of the children. As another participant wrote, “When you are serving children who may not have enough food, or stable living environments in other ways, the high emphasis placed on tests should be viewed as a method to set students up to fail.” The participants were arguing for less high stakes in the name of accountability and more focus on the needs of the students sitting in the classroom.

In addition to participants expressing their desire or the desire of their child to leave public education for homeschooling, other participants also discussed moving from public school to private school. As educators in the study, some of the participants shared their decision to leave their positions as teachers in public schools to teach in private schools. These participants felt this move was needed in order to have more autonomy in their classrooms in order to be able to teach kids instead of teaching to a test. In regards to the public school-private school discussion, participants in the study shared knowledge of the disparity of success between the different levels of socioeconomic status as test scores nearly always correlate with the income level of the students’ families. One individual wrote,



*Poor kids get tested, rich gets get caught. Unfortunately, I am seeing that firsthand. Public school students are tested to death and expected to conform and follow; private school children are taught, respected, and groomed to be leaders.*

Another participant stated instead of opting out of standardized assessments their family opted out of public school.

**Miscellaneous Reasons.** Participants in this study shared additional areas of concern for them related to standardized assessments. Some participants were concerned with the “propaganda of the tests.” In this regard, they were discussing the inclusion of religious topics being taught in the curriculum and included on the assessments. They also shared examples from their children’s homework or test items shared by their children they feel were product placements being used as promotional advertisements for products such as Barbie, Nike, and Disney.

Another thing mentioned in participant responses was the relatively new use of computer-based assessments for annual state testing and the failures being reported in different states. Participants in this study shared their child’s frustrations in working with the types of assessments they believe are developmentally inappropriate. One participant was the mother of a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader having to prepare for TNReady and another participant was the mother of a 1<sup>st</sup> grader upset over his trouble with taking an unnamed computer-based assessment. The mother of the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade student wrote she learned through her child’s homework that the homework would need to be typed in order to prepare for the TNReady test. She shared that she felt the computer-based tests were developmentally inappropriate for children, because they have not been taught how to type yet. For her, it

raised questions on how the test could possibly be measuring what it was intended to measure if student focus was spent on how to use their keyboard. For the mother of the first grader, she learned through her child getting upset over a test that he was worried about the tests being online. She shared, “My first grader gets so sad when his fingers didn’t hit the numbers on the keyboard fast enough and then another question is on the screen. He keeps telling me, ‘I can’t do it fast enough!’”

In discussing the failure of some computer-based tests, one participant shared an analogy between the states’ continued use in tests with glitches and mishaps in cooking. The participant wrote,

*When the computer based testing failed, it should have been halted completely. When you bake a cake and you have a major malfunction...like you crack a rotten egg in the batter...you don’t keep forging ahead. You scrap everything and start over.*

Although this particular participant did not reference Tennessee or Texas specifically in their response, the analogy reflects the sentiment many of the participants from Tennessee and Texas expressed regarding the newly adopted computer-based tests adopted since the acceptance of Race to the Top (RTTT) grants and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Participants in the study from Tennessee are calling for the state to halt the further testing of students using standardized assessments until the state has worked out kinks of their new English language arts and math standards. One study participant wrote, “Children and teaching aren’t standardized. Prove efficacy before implementation. Teachers assess their students more than adequately.” Participants made

suggestions that states need to allot time in their assessment roll-outs for the teachers in their state to work with the assessment and then allow them to come together to develop a teacher created state assessment with questions coming from classroom practices. As one participant wrote, “The BEST judge of a student’s abilities is utilizing many modes of assessments administered by the teacher. A good teacher can tell you where a student is succeeding and not succeeding much more accurately than these high priced testing materials.”

One participant stated that their family was not opting out due to the effects of testing on their child, but instead, she was opting out in order to protect her child’s teacher. The participant explained her child was special needs and she did not feel the tests were of any benefit to her child. She did not have any faith in standardized assessments to accurately measure any aspect of her child’s ability, because she felt the tests lacked the differentiation her child’s needs required. She wrote that she trusted her child’s teacher to provide assessments matching the instruction she was providing her daughter. She felt the teacher-designed assessments provided her much greater value in regards to what her child was being taught and how her child was learning. She did not want her child’s disability be used as a tool to hurt the teacher. For her, she decided to opt her child out of standardized assessments as a show of support for the teacher. She was not the only one.

Many participants shared similar sentiments regarding their children’s teachers and why they were opposed to standardized assessments or the reform efforts happening in the K-12 schools their children attended. Participants believed the standardized

assessments being used were not proven to measure what they were intended to measure. One participant wrote, “My child has a bipolar disorder and was experiencing mania during test time. I searched for a medical opt-out process as testing when manic is obviously not a good reflection of learning.” Another participant wrote about the children coming to school on tests days without having anything to eat at home or after staying up all night listening to parents argue. These participants argued that standardized assessments are not a good measure of students’ learning or an accurate evaluation of a teacher’s effectiveness, because there is no way to account for all of the outside variables the child and teacher have no control over.

### **Did Not Opt Out**

Of the 135 participants who indicated that they did not opt their children out of testing, 127 chose to provide information regarding why they made this decision for their family. When the participants were asked why they chose not to opt their child out of testing, there were several overall topics resonating across multiple participants as listed in here in order of prominence in the data: effects on child; fear; opt out process; no effects on child; real world applications; accountability; effects on school and teacher; school response; and miscellaneous.

**Effects on Child.** The area of main concern for the participants in this study for why they chose not to opt their child out of testing dealt with the effects of opting out on their child. Participants were concerned their child would feel singled out or have a stigma placed on them affecting their relationship with their teachers and peers. In

referring to her daughter, one participant stated, “She cannot handle the stress of being the only kid not taking the test. Anxiety is already a big factor here.”

In some districts, only students taking the test participate in fun activities after the test sessions are complete for the day during assessment weeks. Activities shared by participants included test takers receiving special treats, getting extra recesses, or participating in incentive parties for students who were viewed as “trying their best” on the assessments and who showed growth. Participants did not want their child to be excluded from these fun activities.

The high stakes of the tests for students were also an important factor for some participants. As some states require the calculation of test scores into students’ second semester grades, participants in the study were worried about the effects opting out of standardized tests would have on their children’s GPA. Participants were worried this would effect their chance of getting scholarships needed to help pay for college. A few participants were worried about their child losing the transfer status needed to enroll in schools of their choice or lose their ability to enroll in enrichment activities and programs offered to students with high test scores.

**Fear.** In addition to the effects on the child, participants responded that fear was a very prominent reason for their decision to have their children participate in the annual testing given in their schools. Participants feared the retribution their children might face in school for their parents choice to opt them out. One participant shared their child feared how opting out would make their teacher think about them or treat them in class. In some cases, the fears may have only been a perceived fear, however one participant

had a real reason to be afraid. One of her children's teachers told her that her son would catch grief and bullying from the other teachers if he was opted out of testing.

73 of the participants who have not opted their children out of standardized assessments indicated they were from homes with at least one educator. Fear was listed as a reason why these individuals did not opt their children out of standardized assessments. They stated that as an employee of the school district where their children attended school they feared losing their jobs or feeling alienated by their peers if they opted their child out of standardized assessments. They were fearful of retributions that they may have faced, such as receiving a low rating for their job performance evaluations, loss of privileges at work, or being denied contract renewal. For some, this fear may or may not have been a valid concern. However, in at least one instance, it was a definite concern. The participant said, "Because I am a teacher in the system and we had been warned about it." One individual was a substitute teacher in the district and had hopes of becoming a teacher in the district. She worried if she opted her child out she would hurt her chances of being called for substitute jobs or future hiring chances.

**Opt Out Process.** Another area participants shared in regard to their decision to not opt their children out of standardized assessments involved the opt out process. The majority of participants stated they were unaware opting out of testing was even an option. They knew standardized assessments were given in schools as required by federal law and in most cases, their states did not recognize the parental right to opt their children out of annual assessment measures.

Of the other participants, the most prevalent reason given was almost a topic itself for why participants were not opting out. Participants did not opt their children out of testing, because they felt they lacked the information needed to do it. One participant wrote,

*Because I don't really know how. All of the online groups are geared towards grades 3-8. I also cannot get a straightforward response from my son's teacher regarding the testing, the dates, the length, what the individual tests are, and what they are used for. NO TRANSPARENCY. Parents are not being informed of anything.*

Participants stated the opt out process was difficult and they were unsure what to do. They were not sure if it was an option. They were unsure what the effects would be for their child, their children's teachers, or their children's school. One participant shared her experience in trying to find out information about the opt out process and trying to opt her child out. She stated, "I tried, but my 20+ emails to various schools and admin were not enough to find how opting out would affect my child's grade and what she could do while the others were taking the test." Districts did not supply information regarding testing windows, so this participant and others were not sure how to plan absences or what their children would be doing in lieu of testing during the testing window.

Participants were also unsure how to handle the 'opt out vs. refusal' scenario and how forcing their child to refuse the test on their own would make them feel. One participant simply wrote "lack of energy." Of the remaining participants stating the opt

out process as the reason for why they chose not to opt out, they shared plans to opt their children out of standardized assessments in the future.

**No Effects on Child.** The next topic of importance in the responses of participants that chose not to opt their child out of testing was that standardized assessments had no effects on their children. Participants responded their children had no signs of test anxiety or changes in their physical and mental wellness. One participant stated they allowed their child to take assessments, because their children enjoy taking them. Another participant shared her child does well on the tests and their score helps their teacher or school.

A few participants shared the decision to take the tests was their child's decision. One participant stated, "My child did not want to opt out. She said, 'I've prepared for the test all year, mom. I want to take it.'" She went on to talk about her child's teacher and how much she loved her. She did not want to penalize the teacher or the school by taking away their child's good score. Lastly, participants shared there was no reason to opt their child out of tests this year in their state, because the tests would have no negative effects on their child as the assessments would not be factored into grades this school year.

**Real-World Applications.** Animosity toward the opt out movement among study participants was found in this area of the study. In regards to why participants chose not to opt their child out of standardized assessments, participants stated they were not opting their children out, because standardized assessments are the new norm of K-12 schools in the United States. Participants felt like their children needed to participate in these types of assessments, because they have "real world applications" and their children need to get



use to them. As one participant stated, “It’s just a test given once a year. As young adults, they will be tested for many things. This is an adequate way to prepare them without too many side effects.” Another participant responded, “Life is a series of tests, even if this test isn’t assessing their skill accurately, I do believe it gives the child test taking experience.”

One participant stated they felt it was their parental responsibility to teach their children a needed life skill. This participant felt it was their responsibility to teach their child sometimes in life they would be required to do things they did not necessarily want to do. The participant also blamed other parents instead of teachers, schools, or assessments for how children feel in response to testing situations. The participant stated,

*While I disagree with the amount of standardized tests and the high stakes attached to the tests, I feel that my children have to learn to follow the rules. There will be many things in life they don’t want to do or agree with but must do. I feel the parents are causing the anxiety for the kids by making a bigger deal out of it. I put no pressure on them or barely talk about the tests with my children. They just do their best and get on with their life. No drama.*

Another participant stated they did not feel like it was their parental right to opt their child out of testing. The participant felt like it was their job to select their child’s school and then it became the schools’ job to make decisions on how best to educate them. The last participant providing a response under this topic said, “It’s a test. Children get anxious. People get anxious. They get over it. Children are upset over these tests, because

their parents have taught them that they are something to get anxious over. People need to get over it.”

**Accountability.** There were a small number of participants who stated they felt their child had a responsibility to take standardized assessments, because there needs to be accountability. These participants mentioned the need to have data to use as a comparison to evaluate the quality of the assessments and grades for classwork that teachers were giving their children as part of the day-to-day classroom instruction. Other participants felt like teachers, schools, districts, and states needed to participate in standardized assessments as part of the accountability movement to ensure that all students had access to a quality education regardless of where they were receiving instruction.

**Effects on Schools and Teachers.** There were 14 participants that worried about the effects of a decision to opt out on their child’s school or teacher and decided it was not worth the risk. One participant stated they really believed in the expertise of their child’s teacher and appreciated the work the teacher did with their child. The participant knew their child’s score would be of benefit to their child’s teacher in the calculation of the teacher’s effectiveness. Another participant shared, “I know my child’s good scores are important to the school.” She shared her child’s school is on the ‘dreaded list’ for schools needing to improve and she did not want to take away her child’s score from them. Four participants were worried about the threat of funding loss for their children’s school if families opted out of testing and worried it would hurt the school’s ranking.

**School Response.** A few of the participants in the study gave examples of responses their children's schools gave when they broached the subject of opting their children out of testing. In some cases, participants met with their child's individualized education plan (IEP) teams to discuss their concerns regarding the standardized assessments being given in their child's grades and the schools wrote into the IEP's different accommodations the students would receive during test administrations. Participants stated they felt pressure by the school to have their child participate in the standardized assessments.

In one case, the school administration offered the family a compromise if the parent allowed their child to continue to participate in the annual standardized assessment required by the state. In this participant's case, the school offered to eliminate all additional progress monitoring assessments and test preparation activities if the family allowed their child to participate in the state's annual assessment. The participant stated the school administrators were concerned with the effects of failing to meet the 95% participation rate previously required of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. The parent took an advocate with them to help them make the best decision for their child regarding assessments.

**Miscellaneous.** A few of the participants shared responses that stood out on their own as individual topics or ideas. One participant shared that disagreement within the family led to their child continuing to participate in standardized assessments as they were struggling to come to agreement regarding the best decision for their family. Another participant shared they were opposed to standardized assessments and the high

stakes attached to them for children, teachers, and schools, but these individuals felt it was best to advocate for better educational practices in other ways.

Four participants gave various levels of support for standardized assessments as reasons why they chose not to opt their child out. A participant shared their positive experiences as a child taking tests and how it made them feel to do well on them. They knew their child was going to be successful taking assessments and did not understand why there would be concerns for children to take them. Although one participant stated she felt standardized assessments did not measure what they were intended to measure, she did feel schools needed some practice to help students become familiar with testing situations, like the SAT or GRE. One participant felt the standardized tests currently available needed improvement, but they provided one piece of data on student progress. The last participant stated standardized assessments were a good indicator of the work teachers were doing in the classroom, but changes were needed in order to make the tests less intrusive to the instruction provided to students.

### **Opt Out Treatment**

The 209 participants who indicated they chose to opt their children out of testing were asked if they felt they were treated any differently for not allowing their children to participate in standardized assessments. 85 participants felt treated differently in their children's schools by their child's teacher, the school administration, or other individuals. These individuals were then asked to share the treatment they received upon informing the school they were opting out. Several overall topics emerged when analyzing the

participants' responses. These topics included opt out options, threats/bullying, treatment of the child, treatment of the family, and treatment of the parents.

**Opt Out Options.** After participants informed their children's school they were opting their child out of participating in standardized assessments, the school informed them of any available options. The majority of participants felt resistance to their decision from the school administration and some were denied their request to opt out. A few of the participants' schools responded that the children would be required to sit in isolation while their classmates took the assessments and others were told their children would be allowed to read or draw during this time. A few participants were told their children would only be allowed to sit and stare in the room with their peers taking assessments.

In addition to the options made available to the participants regarding the test situation, participants expressed they felt their choosing to opt their children out of testing caused their child to lose beneficial instructional time by being asked to complete separate learning materials as busy work. Participants went back to school with their concerns and requested that their child also not participate in test preparation activities or other busy work. In regards to test preparation materials, one participant mentioned being opposed to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and test preparation activities, but stated "opting out of those would mean the child did nothing at school all day."

**Threats/Bullying.** This topic in the research overlapped with the treatment school staff gave to children, families, and parents regarding their decision to opt out. Upon first informing the school of their decision to opt out of standardized assessments, participants went through a cycle of letters, emails, phone calls, and meetings regarding their decision

and the school's reaction to their request. In some cases, it was more conversation like in which the district tried to understand the participant's decision to opt out while at the same time trying to convince the participants they needed to forego their previous decision to opt out. For some individuals, the letters and emails were perceived to be more harassing in nature. These involved the school telling them that:

- Their choice could face them with a visit to truancy court appearance for missing too many test days;
- Their child could lose their transfer status to attend a school out of their zoned district;
- Their choice to opt out could effect funding the school received;
- Their choice could effect the evaluation rating their children's teacher received;
- and
- Their choice could lead to their child being retained.

The participants in this study shared that the school environment no longer felt welcoming, but instead became what felt like a hostile environment. A few participants were told their child could lose the chance to attend a field trip provided to students who performed well on the test. After speaking with other parents about her decision to opt her child out, one participant was threatened with calls to the police for trespassing on school grounds. Some of the participants who were educators were threatened with job loss if they continued to share their opinion of standardized assessments. Other parents in the study were called names by school staff and were videotaped while interacting with

other parents. Several participants were also threatened with lawsuits if the school lost any funding due to their having a less than 95% participation rate on the assessments.

**Treatment of the Child.** Participants' children were treated differently by members of the school staff upon their parents opting them out of standardized assessments. In addition to the threats and bullying that were shared above, participants shared other negative ways in which their children were treated.

Many of the participants in this study shared examples of how the instruction given to their children was affected. Participants felt their children were given less instructional opportunities as they were forced to sit and stare while their peers were taking the tests. Others were allowed to sit and silently read during testing windows. Other participants felt forced to send their children to school late or keep them at home on test days, because they were told or feared their children would be forced to participate in testing. Some children were put in isolation in the in-school suspension room, made to sit in the principal's office, or sit alone in hallways. After the test session was completed for the day, one participant reported their child was forgotten in isolation until just before school dismissal. The participant shared the school forgot to give their child lunch.

Some participants shared that their children started to be treated as behavior problems in the class in part due to their family "rocking the boat." Previously, well-behaved students started to be called out in class and were labeled in front of their peers for opting out. One student was suspended twice for refusing to bubble answers in on the

test. Other children were threatened with retention and removed from participation on their athletic teams.

Participants shared examples of how their children were made to feel by members of the school staff. One participant shared how both of her children were made to feel as if they were no longer members of the class. As the school was gearing up for testing and celebrating after the test window closed, children were denied participation in test celebrations. One of the boy's teachers bought cupcakes for the class and gave all of the other children one in front of him. When the class picture was taken, he was not allowed to be in the photo because he did not take the test with the class. Some children were shamed for their parents' decisions and called stupid by their teacher in class. One participant had a teacher tell another parent that the parent who was opting out "must be afraid that their child is as stupid as they are and are afraid to let them take the test because it would show how stupid they both were."

Participants shared examples of things students were denied as a result of not participating in the scheduled standardized tests. One child was denied an invite to the end of year school party for students showing growth on the assessments. Other children were not given special treats provided by the school's PTO each day after testing was over. Some participants felt their children were denied enrichment activities or other extra resources provided to the rest of the class.

One of the big issues with participants involved in the opt out movement concerns the vocabulary participants use in their requests to opt out. In particular, most states do not have policies in place recognizing parental right to opt their children out of testing. In



these cases, schools sometimes respond stating the parents cannot opt their child out of testing, but the children can verbally refuse to test. Verbally is a key term in this situation, because some parents wrote letters for the children to hand to test proctors to inform them they are refusing the tests. Some schools also do not recognize this request. In these situations, the child must refuse the test for themselves. One participant shared their experience with having to teach their child how to refuse the test, because the school would not allow the parents to do it for the child. The participant felt it was “unbelievable that people who call themselves educators think eight year olds should have to perform acts of civil disobedience.”

In some of the cases that involved children having to refuse the test for themselves, participants shared their children were made to feel guilty and were pressured to disobey their parents by teachers and other school staff. Some of the children were offered the test and were coerced into taking it. One participant shared, “My child was told to reconsider, because their decision could hurt the school.”

In some cases, participants shared positive ways their children were treated. Some participants felt they were treated with a cold shoulder, but they only had nice things to say about their child’s teacher. These participants shared that their children were treated nicely by their teachers and they did not see any negative effects in the treatment of their children in the school. A few parents shared their children were the envy of their peers for being able to not take the assessments.

**Treatment of the Family.** Some participants felt their relationship with the school was negatively affected by their decision to opt their children out of testing and it

showed in how they were treated at school. Some participants stated nothing directly happened to them, but the participants felt tolerated, not encouraged, to visit their children's schools. Other participants felt they were treated as a nuisance at the school and felt monitored.

Some of the parents shared more direct experiences with the school staff and how their family was treated after they opted their children out of state tests or after they voiced their opinion to others regarding how they viewed testing or the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). One participant shared that one teacher was very angry with them and their requests for their child to not participate in test preparation activities were denied. Their requests to have a parent teacher conference about their decision were also denied. Another participant was charged with truancy for keeping their child at home during testing sessions and other participants were excluded from participation in their school's PTO chapter.

The most extreme example of the negative treatment participants received when they tried to opt their children out of standardized assessments involved the falsification of a student's records. One participant in the study opted their middle school age child out of standardized assessments, but refused to keep the child home on school days or allow their child to go to school late. The participants' understanding of the teacher evaluation system used in their district is that all students who are present in the building on test day are calculated into the teachers' ratings. Because the participant's child was in the building but in isolation, the child could not be considered absent and therefore the child would have received a zero on the test for use in the teacher's evaluation and the

child's semester grade. Shortly after the testing window closed, the participant received a truancy letter from the school demanding the family appear before the court regarding their child's attendance records. The participant was confused because her child had near perfect attendance. When she demanded to see her child's cumulative record kept in the office, the attendance record had been falsified by marking the child absent on test days.

**Treatment of the Parents.** The last overall topic relates specifically to how parents were treated upon opting their children out of standardized assessments. One major issue of concern for participants in the study was the level of respect the school administration showed regarding their parental rights. When some participants turned in their requests to opt out, they felt as if they were labeled as troublemakers for "rocking the boat". They felt lied to about their testing rights and felt pressured by the administration to either allow their child to participate in state testing or keep quiet regarding their feelings toward the assessment practices. One participant provided an example of being called stupid by one of their child's teachers and was yelled at during a meeting with school administrators regarding their decision.

Another area involving the treatment of parents in the study deals with how participants were made to feel by members of the school staff. Participants shared their disappointment in how the school handled their request to opt out and their development of feelings of distrust toward their child's teachers. One participant filed a complaint against the school administrative team with the district's central office. During a forced meeting about their opt out request, the parent accused the school of state sanctioned child abuse, because the staff refused to allow her to opt out of the assessments she felt

were developmentally inappropriate for her child. Others parents stated they were excluded from participation in parent groups and were gossiped about by teachers to other members of their community.

### **Obstacles to Opting Out**

206 of the participants followed up with the question regarding any obstacles they may have faced when opting out of testing. Although 107 participants did not feel they faced any obstacles, 98 participants identified obstacles to their being able to opt their child out of testing in addition to the treatment they received by members of the school staff. Participants in this study shared the following 7 overall topics regarding obstacles they faced when trying to opt their children out of standardized assessments: alternate test arrangements, participant feelings, opt out communications, opt out consequences, opt out options, opt out responses, and threats/bullying.

**Alternate Test Arrangements.** For the prompt ‘What obstacles did you face when opting out of testing?’ in the census survey, participants were not given very many options for their children regarding alternate test arrangements. A few participants shared information about meetings with their children’s special education team. Participants were told requirements in their special education programs required the annual progress monitoring of children with individualized education plans (IEP) and if they wished for their child to continue participating in the special education program offered in the district, their child would be required to take the assessments. Of the participants that chose to allow their children to take the tests, the team made changes to their IEPs, which provided additional testing accommodations addressing some of the parental areas of

concern regarding the testing of their children. After meeting with the child's special education team, one participant chose to continue opting their child out, but the participant shared their child was given the option to read while peers were taking tests in lieu of the sit and stare option.

**Participant Feelings.** In regards to feelings expressed by the participants regarding obstacles they faced when opting out, fear of retribution was the biggest thing for them to overcome or factor they weighed when deciding to opt out. They worried about how their children would be treated. They worried about how it would affect their children's grades. If they were employees of the school district their children attended, they worried about their job and how their coworkers would treat them.

Participants felt pressure to support their children's schools and teachers. They felt harassed by members of the school staff regarding their decision to opt out. They reported their children feeling stressed over testing and anxious over being opted out. They worried their child would feel singled out by school staff or peers.

**Opt Out Communications.** Communication between the participants and the school staff was another consequence participants dealt with when opting their children out from standardized assessments. To begin the opt out process, several participants in the study reported speaking to the school staff about their decision first. Of those, most participants were told the school had to have the request in writing. If participants sent an email, participants were told it had to be a letter with a handwritten signature in order to be considered an official request. Participants discussed getting help in crafting their letters from drafts of opt out letters posted online in Facebook groups or on parent

support websites. In a few instances, participants were told they had to fill out an opt out form for the district to consider the parental request to keep their child from participating in standardized testing.

After submitting their opt out letters or forms to the school, some participants were told written communication was not enough. They had to have parent teacher meetings to personally share their concerns. They also needed to have meetings with the principal. A few participants had to have meetings with the school superintendent and two individuals reported having to appear before the school board to make their request.

A few participants stated they felt throughout the process they were being given the run around by school staff in an effort to keep them from opting out. This strategy by the school staff worked to keep some individuals from opting their children out. In one instance, the participant was convinced she was doing the right thing for her child, but she was frustrated in figuring out the process and how to get the school to accept her decision. She recruited a special education advocate without emotional ties to the situation to attend meetings with her to ensure she acted in the best interest of her child. During the first year the participant considered opting her child out of testing, the child's educational support team included accommodations in the child's individualized education plan (IEP). The advocate agreed with the school staff these accommodations could eliminate the harm the mother was worried the testing was doing to her child. As the next school year started, the participant still felt the testing her child was being given was excessive and developmentally inappropriate. She scheduled a meeting with the child's special education team and took the advocate with her again. The advocate

worked to eliminate all progress monitoring and unnecessary testing for the child.

Although this participant did not opt out of standardized assessments used for accountability purposes, she did opt her child out of all testing she felt was excessive and harmful to her child.

Another issue participants mentioned in their responses regarding how communication with the school staff was an obstacle to opting their child out of testing dealt with the vocabulary or terminology used throughout the process. Participants had to develop an understanding of how their children's schools identified different assessments utilized within the school in order to make sure that their children were not participating in the things they were opposed to their child working on, such as test preparation materials, benchmark tests, end of course tests, annual state standardized assessments, etc. The biggest problem for participants in this area was the concept of opting out vs. refusing.

One thing asked of me by participants in this study was to be sure to address this issue. They were adamant in their responses the use of opt out or refuse needed to be addressed in the research. According to study participants, there is no opt out movement. There is only a refusal movement. In most instances, refusal was essentially the same thing as opting out. The participants had to refuse testing for their child citing religious reasons as why they do not want their child to participate in standardized assessments. In other instances, the participants were told they had no parental right to opt their child out. They were told their child had to refuse on their own to not participate in the test.

For some states, the issue concerning the vocabulary or semantics of the request ended there. In other states, the issue concerning the semantics of the request mattered for how the child was ultimately affected by non-participating. If the child's parents had opted them out and kept them at home during the testing window, the child's score sheet would have been marked absent and it would have no effect on the child. If the child was at school and refused testing, the test was marked as an irregularity. Sometimes this still meant the child was not affected by not participating. In others cases, marking the test as an irregularity meant the child was given a zero for the test, but the school or teacher rating was not affected.

When opting out or when trying to decide the course of action to take for their family regarding participation in standardized assessments, a few individuals shared communication with staff in their child's district or state personnel as the biggest obstacle they faced. A participant in New York mentioned receiving notices from the school's central office administration and school lawyers informing the parents they did not have the right to refuse testing for their child and they outlined the consequences opting out would have on the child, the teacher, the school, and district. In particular, they pointed to the 95% participation rate required by NCLB and mentioned district funding could be affected for parents opting their children out of testing if they did not meet the participation rate as outlined in the NCLB mandate.

Participants in Tennessee discussed memos sent to school district from the Commissioner of Education Candace McQueen. One of the memos outlined for school officials the state's legal position regarding the parents opting out of state assessments



(Personal Communication, 2015, April 14). In the memo, she referred to parent requests as both opt out and refusals and referenced state and federal laws mandating the use of such assessments for accountability purposes. In the memo, McQueen can be quoted,

Parents do have the constitutional right to direct their children's education, which is why parents in Tennessee and other states have many educational options from which to choose (e.g., private school, home school, public school, etc.). However, once parents select public school for their children's education, there are many aspects of the content and instructional programs that are mandated by law.

As can be expected, participants who cited parental right as a deciding factor in their decision to opt their child out of testing took offense to this comment. The memo went on to give directives to school districts regarding their responsibility to assess all students and to not offer alternative plans to assist parents in opting their children out of state mandated assessments. As participants mentioned the memo in this study, they remarked on how offensive it was and referred to it as a bullying tactic by the state department of education. One participant referred to it as a sign of fear at the state level to the resistance growing against the excessive testing happening in public schools across the state of Tennessee. Additionally, one participant wrote about the excessive testing happening in his child's school, "She's nine. I took fewer standardized tests to become a licensed attorney than she did to pass the third grade."

**Opt Out Consequences.** Participants in the study shared many consequences their family faced upon opting their children out of standardized assessments.

Consequences participants in this study mentioned related to the effects of opting out on their children, effects of opting out on the parent, and financial costs related to their opting out of standardized tests.

The children of the participants in this study faced many consequences for not participating in state assessments. Participant responses indicated there were threats of placement in remedial courses and denial of enrollment in honors classes. A few participants shared their children were denied privileges given to test takers, such as incentive field trips and extra recesses. Participants mentioned loss of instruction as both an effect testing has on children and as a consequence of the forced absences needed for children to opt out on test days. Participants also mentioned they were afraid their child would either be singled out by their teachers and peers or would feel singled out as there were a limited number of families opting their children out of tests in their district.

The participants in this study also mentioned financial costs their families faced as a consequence of opting their children out of standardized assessments. Two participants mentioned the cost of hiring a lawyer as a financial cost they incurred for their decision to opt out. One of the individuals hired a lawyer in order to sue the school district for denying their parental rights to be involved in the education of their child. Another participant mentioned being involved in a lawsuit against the school's administrative staff, because they felt harassed and unwelcomed in the school. Several participants mentioned the cost of needed doctors appointments scheduled to avoid their child being given an unexcused absence and possible truancy court appearances. The majority of participants in this study are employed full-time. As they made the choice to either keep

their child at home or take them to school late, participants had to miss work and for some individuals this meant lost wages, which participants listed as a consequence their family faced for opting out.

Other consequences participants faced for opting their child out of standardized assessments were in regards to the effects parents felt. Two participants indicated members of the school staff verbally attacked them and two other participants had to spend time finding a parent advocate to take with them to meetings at the school. One participant mentioned not being allowed to serve in the school's Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and having teachers gossip about them to other parents over their decision to opt their child out of testing. Participants also mentioned time away from work as a consequence they faced for opting their child out of testing. Parents had to use family time to do independent research on the opt out movement. They had to leave their younger children with a babysitter while they attended meetings with school staff or when they attended informational meetings regarding the opt out movement.

**Opt Out Options/Alternate Test Activities.** Participants responded the available options provided to their children when opting out was also an obstacle they faced. As shared above, one obstacle faced by participants concerned the consequences they faced for keeping their children at home or take to school late on test days. For participants that either had no choice or that chose to send their children to school, they were worried about the sit and stare requirement some schools followed for non-test takers.

An issue mentioned by participants as an obstacle to opting their children out of standardized assessments involved the use of reading as an option provided as an

alternate to test taking during the testing sessions. For some participants, their children were allowed to read in the testing room or in isolation while other students were taking the test. For some participants, their children were not allowed to read, but instead, test proctors were required to make children sit and stare in the testing room while their peers completed the test. One participant shared their experience with opting out and reading that was different from any of the other participants in the study. The participant said, “Last year, we were told we needed to provide an ‘alternate academic activity’ for our children to do while others tested. We were told that reading a book was not an appropriate academic activity and that we would need to basically create a lesson for our child.”

In each of these scenarios, there were participants who were upset, because they felt reading was being used as a tool against the children whose families opted them out. By forcing children to read for three hours, it could create an atmosphere where children develop derogatory feelings toward reading. By not allowing children to have the option of reading available to them in place of the sit and stare option, it puts reading in a negative light as something they should not do instead of developing their love of reading.

**Opt Out Responses.** In addition to the communication that occurred between the home and school as participants worked to inform the school of their decision to opt out, the particular responses that participants received from school staff were also given as obstacles they faced. In this study, participants mentioned state law being referred to as reasons for why they were not allowed to opt out of testing. Participants were also told

that the state and school district did not have opt out policies in place to allow families to refuse the tests.

Throughout the study, participants mentioned the false information provided to them by the school staff regarding the opt out movement and parental rights. Participants also listed this as an obstacle they faced when attempting to opt their children out of standardized assessments. Regarding the false information provided to participants, the school quoted the 95% participation rate required for testing and the loss of funding to the district if they did not meet that NCLB target. Participants in Texas and Tennessee mentioned being quoted state laws requiring the retention of students who did not pass either the English language arts or mathematics portions of standardized tests in certain grade levels. Participants identified this information as false information given to them by people in the school district, because there has never been a district sanctioned for failing to meet the 95% participation rate of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) nor have funds been taken away for this reason. A few participants mentioned NCLB expired a long time ago and their state was already under a NCLB waiver for failing to meet the requirement to have all students, including special education and English as a Second Language (ESL) students, 100% proficient by 2014.

Other participants mentioned several additional things regarding the responses they received from members of the school staff as obstacles to opting their children out. In a few cases, participants felt school officials ignored or purposely delayed giving responses to parent requests. These participants felt they were being given the run around and that it was done in order to either get parents to give up on their request or to keep

participants from getting an answer in the time some states or districts require notices of request to be submitted.

Participants also felt they received negative responses, which they took as threatening or harassing. Several participants were given directives to choose to home school or send their children to private school if they did not like the “curriculum” provided by their child’s school. A few participants were also told they were harming other children in the school by causing them to be confused as to why some children were not being required to take assessments and they were. Some participants shared that they were asked to lie by school administration or other staff members about their decision to opt out. The participants who were educators responded their school administrators asked them to keep quiet about their concerns with the standardized assessments being given and their decision to opt their own children out. Of those, one participant felt she was being asked to go against what she felt was her ethical responsibility to do what she felt was in the best interest of her students.

However, a few participants in the study had a completely different experience when trying to opt their children out. They received teacher support of their decision and school support. The only obstacle they faced was their worry over the possible effects their decision would have on their child’s teacher or the school.

**Threats/Bullying.** The last obstacles participants mentioned in their responses dealt with ways that they felt threatened or bullied by members of the school staff. Some of the threats participants faced dealt with the potential effects their decision would have on the school district. They felt threatened by school officials who told them they were

breaking state law by refusing to allow their child to take the assessments. One of those participants stated school officials told them any loss of funding the district faced for failing to meet the 95% participation rate would be passed onto the parents who were opting out through legal means. Participants were also told their decision would have a negative impacts on the teachers, such as lowering their teacher effectiveness rating and decreasing the salary bonus provided through merit pay scales.

Other threats made to participants were tied to the consequences of their actions on their children or families. Participants were told their child would be placed in remedial classes for not passing a test they did not take in the first place. Participants were threatened with retention or incomplete records needed to meet graduation requirements. One individual was also threatened with legal action if they did not stop advocating for other families to opt their children out. School administration had a restraining order taken out against the parent to keep her off school campus in an effort to silence her advocacy efforts. The participant also felt harassed by the local police and denied her parental right to participate in her child's education.

### **Concerns About Testing & Additional Information Provided in the Census Survey**

Participants were given the opportunity to share any major concerns they had regarding testing and asked to share any additional information they wished to provide about their family's experiences with standardized assessments. 386 individuals shared information regarding the major concerns they have with the testing currently happening in K-12 schools in the United States and 250 participants wanted to share additional





Participants shared their belief that the government's focus on test scores is hurting the relationship between students and their teachers. They expressed disappointment in the tests as being a waste of time and a waste of money. They wished for schools to respect the content areas and use the money currently being spent on assessments to develop more STEAM programs. One participant stated, "Education is not a sport; it's a relationship. It's a relationship between the kids and the teacher. Don't put tests, technology, billionaires in between them." Participants showed support for their child's teacher in the work they do and recognized their expertise in evaluating student's learning and progress. As one participant stated, "Teachers are the best judges of our children's progress and needs."

### **Study Categories**

In this next section, I describe the 8 categories participant responses produced based on the questions asked of them. My goal in this study was to work to provide some participants with a research platform to share their experiences with standardized assessments and the opt out movement with a larger audience. This study was designed to explore the effects of standardized assessments on families; how some families view the accountability movement; and begin describe who is choosing to participate in the opt out movement that is spreading across the country. These categories address the purpose of my study which was to provide a face to some of the individuals who are behind the testing data that is being used to create mandates in public education or that is being used to influence public opinion regarding the opt out movement by addressing the following research questions:

1. Who are some of the individuals who are participating in the opt out movement?
2. How are some individuals making the decision to participate in the opt out movement?
  - a. What knowledge do these individuals who are participating in the opt out movement have regarding the standardized assessments that their children are being given in public schools?
  - b. How have these individuals who are participating in the opt out movement been affected by the standardized assessments being given in public schools?

**Category 1: Study participant demographics.** One of my previous assumptions as the researcher in the study was that I would be able to sketch a picture of individuals who are participating in the opt out movement that was more diverse than the picture Arne Duncan, former United States Secretary of Education, tried to paint of those who were opposed to CCSS. Arne Duncan described individuals who are opposed to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and its aligned assessments as “white suburban moms” (Klein, 2013). Although this description was offensive to some as portraying white suburban mothers in a negative light, it was also considered offensive to individuals of other demographics as an educational leader would use race and socioeconomic status as a derogatory statement in confronting his opponents. Leaders of the opt out movement have been trying to recruit other minorities and groups to participate in the cause (Bryant, 2016) as they point to the damages these tests do and the

failure of those assessments to improve the gaps between subgroups and their majority counterparts as promised by advocates of assessment use.

My analysis revealed the majority of the participants in this study do reflect the media portrayal of individuals who are opting their children out of standardized assessments. Of the individuals who chose to participate in the census survey and its demographic questions, the individual categories of demographic information in this study could be combined to create a model participant representing the characteristics in the majority of responses received for each question by actual study participants. Based on this information, our sample study participant would be a married, white mother who is approximately 46 years or older. She holds a graduate degree and is working full-time as an educator. She lives in the suburbs and has a household income above \$50K. Our participant believes her child's school gives too many assessments.

This demographic information also represents the majority of individuals in this study who have opted their children out of standardized assessments and participants who reported receiving alternative test options. Although the findings in this study are not supposed to generalize to the entire population of individuals choosing to participate in the opt out movement, this information reflects the participants of this study who are choosing to opt their children out of standardized assessments and if they were given alternative test options when opting their children out.

Although this information is reflective of the majority of individuals participating in the study, there were also other participant characteristics represented, which could point to a more diverse group of individuals participating in the opt out movement than

otherwise portrayed in the media. 38% of participants lived in urban or rural areas. 97% of participants attended college with 84% of those graduating with a college degree. Although the study participants predominantly identified as white, there was a small mix (6%) of other ethnicities represented in the study, including Hispanic, African American, Asian, Black Latina, Multiracial, Italian, and Biracial.

**Category 2: Research base/knowledge of tests.** As individuals participating in the opt out movement, the information participants hold of the tests could be an indicator of why they are choosing to opt out of standardized assessments. Participants shared knowledge they had regarding the tests their children were taking in their schools. The participants predominantly mentioned the state mandated assessments given to their children as mandated to meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Participants also shared knowledge about benchmark and progress monitoring assessments given to meet state requirements under Race to the Top (RTTT) and Response to Intervention (RTI) plans. Participants shared information about the assessments given to their children for the assessment of their proficiency in English Language Arts, Math, and Science, as well as discussed their children's participation in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) aligned assessment PARCC.

As participants discussed knowledge of the different assessments being used in their children's classrooms, they also shared in their responses issues they have with these assessments. Participants were knowledgeable about the controversy surrounding the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). They discussed their view regarding the standards being developed by individuals who were not educators and as being

developmentally inappropriate for age, grade, and academic ability. They were upset over reports of the poor design of the tests and reports of the computer-based assessment failures experienced in some states, which resulted in computer delays or children having to start their tests over.

There were a few participants who did feel differently about the tests and their use as a quality measure. These participants shared a glimpse into the instruction provided in their children's school, but they also felt these assessments should not be used for high stakes measures like determining teacher effectiveness or student retention. There was also a discussion by participants having an understanding of the need to give the tests for accountability purposes.

The information or knowledge participants have regarding the opt out movement is also an indicator of why participants are opting out and/or why they are having trouble opting their children out of standardized assessments. In trying to learn about the opt out movement, respondents shared that the predominant manner in which participants learned about the opt out movement was through independent research. They conducted this research on social media groups designed for parents wishing to learn about opting their children out or parents opposed to standardized assessments. Participants searched online through education groups and media reports on the news and newspapers. They also learned about the opt out movement through "word of mouth" by talking with friends, family, and co-workers. One participant also identified her child's teacher as the source of her learning about the opt out movement.

**Category 3: Effects on children.** The analysis of the data in this study shared participants' knowledge of the effects that standardized assessments have on children. Participants shared this knowledge in relation to their family experiences with standardized assessments and as concerns they have with these tests. The individuals in this study have children who have been affected by standardized assessments in many ways. Participants and their children were often worried about the high stakes attached to standardized assessments, such as being retained in grade levels based on their performance on assessments. Children were also worried about how their performance on standardized assessments would affect their teacher.

Participants noticed a change in their child's mental wellness in the weeks leading up to testing. In terms of their child's mental wellness, participants noticed a change in their child's appetite; a change in their sleep patterns; changes in their personality; signs of the child having anxiety; emotional changes; signs of the child harming themselves; and the child talking negatively about themselves. The participants talked about signs of their child being anxious, depressed, nervous, frustrated, worried, stressed, and irritated. Anxiety in response to worry over their test performances effects on them and worry over their performance effecting their teacher were two of the major sources of mental change in participants' children.

Some of the things participants noticed in regards to the physical changes in their child were increased stomach issues, headaches, sickness, vomiting, and an increase in occurrences of illnesses in the child. Participants also shared the same effects as signs of change in their child's physical wellness as they noticed as changes to their mental

wellness, including change in appetite; change in sleep patterns; emotional changes; harming self; and personality changes.

Signs of anxiety and signs specifically identified as test anxiety included the same breakdown categories and in Vivo codes as changes identified in the other categories of participant identified changes noticed in the children in the weeks leading up to testing. Anxiety in comparison to the demographics of census survey participants represented the information shared for our model study participant. Signs of test anxiety were identified in children predominantly living in homes with an income above \$50K. These participants were white, married females and there was at least one educator in the home.

**Category 4: Effects on teachers.** In addition to the effects that standardized assessments have on children, the analysis of the data in this study showed a concern of participants regarding the effects standardized assessments had on teachers. Although the majority of participants in this study were either teachers themselves or lived in homes with educators, the effects of standardized assessments on teachers was also a key topic discussed by participants who did not live in homes with educators and in the previously conducted study on the discourse of participants of the opt out movement within a group on Facebook devoted to standardized assessments (Evans, 2015). Participants discussed the issue of teachers' effectiveness, teachers' job security, and pay being determined by "one shot assessments." Participants also shared their concern for teachers feeling forced to teach to the test through a narrowing of the curriculum by using test preparation materials, limiting instructional time devoted to the content areas, and a lack of differentiation. Additionally, participants discussed concern towards teachers leaving the

profession due to the pressure of raising test scores and a loss of relationship with students.

**Category 5: Opt out options.** The majority of participants in the study stated that the only options made available to them in regards to opting out were to test or be absent. They reported feeling resistance at the beginning of the opt out process. A few participants reported their need for doctor's excuses. A few participants mentioned they were told their child would be removed from the testing situation to sit in isolation or with the other students whose parents opted them out. Additionally, participants asked for their children not to participate in test preparation materials and felt like this led to a decrease in the amount of instructional opportunities offered to their children.

There were participants in the study with children receiving special education services. Of those participants, their reasons for opting out were similar to other participants in the study. They mentioned feeling as if the tests were harmful to their children as the tests made them have negative towards themselves and have verbal expressions of failure. Participants stated they felt like the assessments were developmentally inappropriate for their children. They expressed opposition to the school providing differentiated learning opportunities with standardized assessments. Several of these participants either found or hired advocates to attend meetings at the school with them. A few of the participants whose children have individualized education plans (IEP) were given the options in regards to the testing done with their children including an increase in the number of accommodations written into the child's IEP.



The majority of participants reported they were told if their children were present in school at any time during the testing window their child would be administered the test. The child could refuse the test themselves and sit and stare. Others were told that their child could read or draw. Of the participants who listed reading as an option, there were two sets of feelings displayed by participants. Participants were either upset children were expected to read for four hours and felt as if the school was putting reading in a negative perspective for children by using it as a punish for opting out. Other participants were upset that reading was not an available option as the school deemed it as not an acceptable use of educational time.

**Category 6: Opt out obstacles.** 99 participants identified facing obstacles in their decision to opt their children out of standardized assessments. Participants shared the main obstacle faced when opting their children out of standardized assessments was learning the opt out process. Participants had to use family time to conduct independent research to learn what to do, what their options were, and what consequences they could expect. Participants shared that the majority of their research was conducted online via social media, education blogs, state education department websites, education group websites, and advocacy group pages. Participants also learned about the opt out movement through word of mouth with family, friends, co-workers, community groups, and their children's teachers.

Another of the main obstacles faced when attempting to opt children out of standardized assessments was communication with school administrators and staff. This communication regarded letters, emails, phone calls, and meetings with the children's

teachers and/or school administrators to inform them of the participants' decision to opt out and in seeking how the decision would effect their children. Participants felt like they were given the 'run around' in an attempt to make them give up.

Participants also shared that the effects of opting their children out of standardized assessments as one of the obstacles that they faced. As educators, they feared retribution by their co-workers or administrators. As parents, participants worried about how their children would be treated at school or worried that their children would be singled out by their peers. They also worried about what their child would be required to do while other children in the class were testing.

One of the interview participants resonated feelings of other participants regarding an obstacle they faced when opting their children out of standardized assessments. Participants shared feelings of frustration regarding test schedules and make-up exams. For these participants, the option deemed the most appropriate for their families was to keep their child at home during test administration times. Some districts do not post testing information in a manner that participants found easily accessible. Other districts require students to be administered the assessments upon return to school if they are absent during testing windows. Some testing windows last longer than a couple of weeks.

**Category 7: Opt out treatment.** In regards to how they were treated when opting their children out of standardized assessments, participants shared they thought that either they or their children were threatened or bullied after they informed the school of their decision to opt out. In terms of bullying, participants shared examples of name calling,

threats of disenrollment, truancy letters, retention meetings, loss of field trips, isolation, and being singled out.

Participants shared specific treatments that they felt their child or their families had received upon opting out. Participants shared that their children were denied incentives given to other children for participating in the test or for showing growth on assessments. They were pressured to go against the wishes of their parents and were shamed for the decisions of their parents. Families were made to feel as if they were a nuisance to the school or were unwelcome. They shared examples of how they felt excluded from interactions with other parents and felt animosity from their children's teachers. They shared that they felt pressure to stop 'rocking the boat' and they felt their parental rights of participating in their children's education were denied. There were participants, however, that shared they did not face any negative treatments when opting their children out, but instead these individuals felt support from the children's teachers and other staff members for their decision.

**Category 8: Concerns about testing.** Participants were given opportunities to share their opinions and experiences regarding standardized assessments. Participants shared one of their concerns involved with the use of standardized assessments is the lack of differentiation in the assessments. They shared they felt the assessments were developmentally inappropriate for some children's age, grade, and academic needs. Participants felt "individualized instruction needs individualized assessments." Participants also discussed what they felt was a narrowing of the curriculum being taught in classrooms in response to the accountability movement.

Participants mentioned one of their concerns with standardized assessments was the high stakes attached to these for children, teachers, and schools. In particular, participants did not agree with the purposes that assessments are being used. Participants were upset over test scores being used in grade promotion criteria for children, merit pay and evaluations for teachers, and funding allocations for schools. Participants felt like invalid tests, such as computer-based assessments, should not be used for such high stakes measures.

Although a few participants mentioned a need for accountability in regards to teachers and schools, there were no participants concerned about cheating happening in their schools. They also tied this to their view that there is a narrowing of the curriculum in which schools are focused more on improving test scores than in teaching children.

Participants were also concerned with other curricular effects of the accountability movement. Elementary school teachers are charged with the task of helping children learn to read and fostering a love of reading that grows with the child. One participant shared that they hated to see children learning to read for a test instead of developing a joy of reading. Participants shared views that reading is not being treated as something children “get to do” but rather something they “have to do” as a punishment.

### **Key Findings**

In this section, I present key findings obtained from the analysis of 421 census survey responses. My analyses of the data collected in this study regarding participant involvement in the opt out movement and individuals’ experiences with standardized assessments revealed 4 major findings:

1. The study reflected a fairly homogeneous sample of individuals participating in the opt out movement as represented in this study with a small number of these participants reflecting a more diverse sample than otherwise presented in media portrayals. The majority of participants in this study are comprised of the following demographics: white; female; married; 46+ years; graduate degrees; household income above \$50K; and live in suburbs. The majority of individuals in this study stated that they felt the number of assessments given in their children's school was 'too many'. They identified a change in their child's mental, physical, and attitude in the weeks leading up to testing. They also noticed signs of test anxiety in their children. The majority of participants in the overall study had opted their children out of testing, but the slight majority of participants did not feel as if they were treated differently when opting out. Participants of the study also lived in urban and rural areas and were predominantly college educated. They also included a small sample of participants of other ethnicities.
2. Individuals are participating in the opt out movement in response to the effects of standardized assessments on their children and factors effecting members of the larger education system in name of the accountability movement. Of the participants who opted their children out of standardized assessments, participants shared an understanding of the issues related to the assessments as the top reason for why they were opposed to their children participating in the assessments. Participants felt the purpose for the assessments were to label

children, teachers, and schools as failing in an effort to privatize public schools. Participants were upset over the collection of student information and risk to students' privacy associated with data mining. Participants were opposed to the high stakes of the assessments for children, teachers, and schools, such as promotion criteria for children, job retention for teachers, and funding for schools. Participants were upset by the effects of standardized assessments on children, such as instruction with narrowed curriculum, the loss of educational opportunities, and negative feelings toward themselves and school. Participants were upset by the effects of standardized assessments on teachers, such as pressure to raise test scores and a decreased ability to work in the best interest of the children in their classrooms. Participants had little faith in these tests, which they referred to as "invalid, unreliable, and inaccurate measures of student academic success." A couple of participants shared that for them opting out represented an act of civil disobedience in support of their children's teachers.

3. The participants of this study have knowledge of current assessments being given in their children's K-12 schools and issues surrounding their use. The participants showed an understanding of the annual state assessments, benchmark and progress monitoring tests, and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) aligned assessments. Participants shared their understanding of the purpose of the assessments at the federal, state, and local level and of the high stakes that have been attached to these assessments in the

name of accountability related to mandates, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RTTT). Participants also discussed issues that individuals have shared regarding the use of tests in and outside the scope of the study, such as test design, developmental appropriateness of the assessment content, inability of test platforms to meet the needs of state assessments, correlation of test scores and socioeconomic status (SES) of the students.

4. The participants of this study have been affected by standardized assessments in many negative ways. The participants shared that their children showed signs of being affected by standardized assessments in the weeks leading into testing in terms of their physical and mental wellness. They also had changes to their attitude and showed signs of test anxiety. Across each of these areas, participants reported the following changes: change in appetite; change in sleep patterns; emotional changes; harm to self; increased anxiety; negative self talk; stomach issues/increased occurrence of illnesses; and personality changes. Participants also shared how the high stakes of the tests have affected them, such as denial of program placement, retention in grade levels, threats of loss of transfer status, and decreased participation in enrichment programs. Some of the participants shared that they were affected by opting out of testing, such as feeling anxiety over effects of opting out on teachers, feeling pressured to go against parental wishes, and feeling animosity and other negative feelings in response to decision to opt out.

## Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to describe some of the participants of the opt out movement and the experiences these individuals have had with standardized assessments and the opt out movement. Each participant in this study has an individual story that reflects their own situations and experiences impacting their participation in the opt out movement. In this chapter, I shared the information provided in the census survey portion of the study regarding participants' experiences with standardized assessments and their participation in the opt out movement:

1. Although the majority of participants in this census are white females ages 46 and older who are married, hold graduate degrees, have household income above \$50K and live in suburbs, there is more heterogeneity than media descriptions have accounted for.
2. Participants believe the number of assessments given in their children's school was 'too many' and identified a change in their child's mental, physical, and attitude in the weeks leading up to testing, including signs of test anxiety.
3. Individuals are participating in the opt out movement in response to the effects of standardized assessments on their children and factors affecting members of the larger education system in name of the accountability movement. They believe the purpose for the assessments was to label children, teachers, and schools as failing in an effort to privatize public schools, and were upset over the collection of student information and risk to students' privacy associated with data mining.



4. The participants of this study have knowledge of current assessments being given in their children's K-12 schools and issues surrounding their use.
5. The participants of this study have been affected by standardized assessments and their high stakes in many negative ways.

In Chapter 5, narratives describing eight of the participants who were also interviewed will be shared to provide a more in-depth look at these experiences.

## **Chapter 5: Interview Narratives**

This chapter focuses on the lived experiences with standardized assessment and the opt out movement of 8 census survey participants who were also interviewed. These 8 were selected to be as diverse a pool as possible. Rich, thick descriptive narratives are provided for these interview participants based on the information they provided in the interview screening protocols, transcripts of their semi-structured interviews, and additional artifacts supplied by them to add to their stories. In order to ensure the readers could hear the voices of these participants, quotes were included in the narratives. In order to keep the promise of confidentiality made to the participants, pseudonyms were assigned to each of the participants and the data were cleaned of any identifying information.

### **Interview Screening Protocol**

421 participants completed the census survey; of those individuals, 182 indicated interest in further participation at the end of the census survey and 92 individuals completed the interview screening protocol. The interview screening protocol asked participants to complete questions regarding: (a) their knowledge of the standardized assessments their children were taking; (b) their opinion of standardized assessments; (c) their family's experiences with standardized assessments; (d) the effects of those assessments on their children; and (e) their experiences within the opt out movement.

More specifically, participants were asked about what assessments their children were taking and the amount of test preparation their children were involved in. They responded to questions about the effects of testing to their child's mental wellness,

physical wellness, attitude, and levels of test anxiety. Additionally, they were asked about their experiences opting their children out, how they were treated, and to share any obstacles they may have faced when opting out.

In addition to being selected based on gender and location, interview participants were selected based on variance in the education level of their children and decision to opt out (Table 5.1). The eight participants of the interview portion of the study were also selected based on their varied experiences with standardized assessments; views of the assessments used in their children’s schools; the effects of such tests on their families; and their experiences within the opt out movement.

**Table 5.1 Interview Narrative Participants**

<b>Participant Pseudonyms</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Marital</b>	<b>Kids</b>	<b>Education Level</b>	<b>Opt Out/Refuse</b>
Randy	New York	No	4 children	elementary, middle, high	Yes
Tina	New York	Yes	2 children	elementary, middle	No
Carl	Texas	Yes	1 child	elementary	Yes
Jessica	Texas	Yes	2 children	elementary, toddler	Yes
Richard	New Jersey	Yes	2 children	high	Yes
Camille	New York	Yes	3 children	middle, high	Yes
Jacey	Tennessee	Yes	2 children	elementary, middle	Yes
Lee Anne	Tennessee	Yes	2 children	middle, high	Yes

### **Interview Narratives**

The narratives that follow provide thick descriptions of the experiences of the 8 interview participants with standardized assessments and the opt out movement. All

participants are identified in the study using pseudonyms. In order to keep the promise made to participants of confidentiality, their narratives were cleaned of any identifying information provided in their responses.

**Randy: *Testing is nonsense, not because it hurts my kids, but because it wastes their time.***

Randy is a father of four whose oldest three children are in the top 5% of their classes. The youngest child also has a high IQ, but struggles with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). As they require sitting for long periods of time, standardized assessments are a struggle for this child. Randy's daughter was described as not being great at math, but having the dedication and drive to do well in all subjects. She is currently 4<sup>th</sup> in her class. Randy chose to focus predominantly on the family's experiences through the lens of one of his middle children.

The family lives in a small community in New York, which Randy describes as having “a small town mentality where everybody knows everybody.” He described the community's view towards “excellence in education” as the exception not the norm. As he was describing the tests used with his children, he talked about the use of K-8 tests to show what the school is doing, grade teachers, and evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum. He shared, “We know teachers are good. We know our curriculum is good. The schools are categorized by the income level of families, where the richest school in our state is the highest performing, the poorest district is coincidentally the poorest performing.” In his town, about 85% of students graduate from the local high school and

about ¼ of those receive an honors diploma. At least half of the children in the district qualify for free and reduced lunch.

When asked about his opt out experience, Randy described wanting the superintendent of the school system to look to what other surrounding districts in their area of the state do for students in middle school who wish to take advanced placement high school credits. This father wishes for his children to be able to take assessments that show what they know and that can provide a benefit to them based on their performance. He said, “I know my concerns are unusual, but I’d like my children to be able to show that they know the material so they don’t have to take unnecessary classes.”

Randy tried to opt his children out of standardized assessments five or six years ago when they first started taking them. At first, he informed the school he was opting his children out of standardized assessments, because it was a waste of their time. He said, “If they are going to spend 6 days in class taking tests, we shouldn’t send them to school. We should go on vacation.”

Randy learned through trial and error that he was using the wrong vocabulary in his attempts to inform the school administration of his decision to stop the standardized assessment of his children. He reported having been misled by the principal of his children’s school who told him if he chose to send his kids to school on test day they would have to take the exam. He shared,

*I was told that my children are not allowed to opt out. This was sent home in writing. When I first started to opt out, I was told that if I removed by children*

*from school during testing, they would have to take them when they returned to school, unless they were out of school for at least four weeks.*

The family considered taking a trip to Disney for the week of assessment, but they could not vacation for the entire four week testing window.

Around the time Randy developed more of an understanding of how the opt out movement works, the school “started being dicks” to his son. By state regulation, if a student can prove they know the material by taking an exam, then they do not have to take the class, which Randy had successfully done himself. His son is very advanced in math. As a 6<sup>th</sup> grader with encouragement from Randy, his son studied with his older sister’s algebra review book during the second semester of the school year. He took the Algebra I regents exam that June. Although the family was met with resistance, his son also took the oral exam portion of the requirements. Randy's son cried both before and after the oral exam, because he knew the individuals giving it were not supportive of him. He told Randy he knew that no matter how well he did, he would have to take the 7<sup>th</sup> grade math the following year. Even though he passed all parts of the exam, the school denied him placement into the higher class and forced him to take an Algebra I class, but he refused to participate with his father’s blessing.

As a father, Randy’s position is that he is not going to allow his children to take any course their “scholarship does not warrant.” He appealed the decision to the school system’s superintendent, but he was told his son could not take the advanced classes without skipping a grade in school. Although his son is academically advanced in math, he was not as academically ready in other subjects. Randy appealed to the board of

education and was successful in his appeal with the exception of one criterion: he did not have the superintendent's approval prior to taking the exam. The board of education members also tried to deny he passed the oral exam, which was not recorded. A score of a 90 represented the top 5% of students in the district. Although an 85 was required to pass the exam and he had made a 90 on the test, the school administration tried to tell him he did not pass. Randy continued fighting with the district for over a year. He finally learned from the high school standpoint his son had met the requirement (test score) for his diploma and would not need to take the class.

The middle school continued to make his son enroll in the lower level class. With his father's blessing, the son stopped completing assignments and started focusing his studies on learning material for trigonometry. As he was failing the course, the district threatened to remove him. The father begged them to do so in order for him to be able to take a different class. However, they did not follow through with their threat.

Although Randy's son was successful in passing the Algebra Regents exam and teaching himself geometry, trigonometry, and calculus as a 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grader, the district would not allow him to test out of any of the classes. His father let him enroll in an online calculus class offered through the local community college. The middle school student passed the college level math course with a B even though he had gone camping for two weeks at the start of the class. The district would not accept the course for credit as he did not do work "dispositive of his public education." His math teachers did allow him a few accommodations in exchange for the district's forcing him to take the class. They stopped grading his homework and only required him to take tests. This was done in order to

allow him to focus his studies on other of areas of math he was ready to learn independently.

Although the younger son was denied credit for his successful passing of a college calculus course, Randy's high school daughter took the same path regarding her calculus credit. The school system immediately accepted the course in exchange for high school credit without any trouble. To explain the disparity in the treatment of his son and daughter, Randy's opinion was that the administration of his son's middle school was not sure how to handle his son's placement in the high school classes as a middle school student. Instead of trying to be innovative and accommodating, the school officials chose to be combative. He also said, "My children's situations show that the district, and by extension the state department of education, prioritizes conformity over education and excellence."

As a participant of the opt out movement who has now chosen to opt his children out of standardized assessments, Randy expected his children's schools to regularly assess his children in order to determine individual student progress or need. He does think the tests his children took did an excellent job of showing a snapshot of their abilities as individuals. His view changed when he was faced with the system using his children's scores to make the district look good, but failing to use the scores to provide his children with a better educational experience:

*Testing is nonsense, not because it hurts my kids, but because it wastes their time.*

*Schools do many things that are nonsense. I wanted to opt out earlier, because I know that it is not a good use of my kids' time.*



Now, Randy is opting out in order to take a stand for his children. He is not going to allow them to take tests that do not benefit them.

**Tina: *They find the tests annoying and would rather be learning.***

Tina lives in New York, and has a 7<sup>th</sup> grader and a 2<sup>nd</sup> grader enrolled in public schools. She has not opted her children out of standardized assessments. Her son has taken ELA and math standardized assessments since the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Her daughter has not gotten into the tested grades yet. Although she has not opted out of standardized assessments, she also has not put an emphasis on them either. As soon as the grades or test reports come in the mail, she throws them in the garbage without ever showing them to her children. She never wants them to think those types of measures define them or that she cares about the scores.

When asked general questions about her knowledge of standardized assessments and the accountability movement, Tina shared that her definition of high stakes testing would be, “Testing that is tied to a reward or punishment. Test results that have a consequence.” She stated the reason for the change in testing in recent years was mandates within NCLB. With regard to the importance of the testing happening in her children’s schools, Tina reported, “It’s important to assess, but it does not need to be as frequent.” She continued that she certainly did not think that standardized assessments are a perfect measure of the quality of education provided in schools, but she still felt these tests are a useful tool to see if students were meeting the standards. She felt it was a somewhat useful tool for measuring a student’s academic ability, but standardized assessments hardly paint a complete picture of what a student is capable of doing.

Describing the effects of standardized assessments she has seen in her children, Tina shared her children have only changed in their attitude. She stated, “They find the tests annoying and would rather be learning. But this attitude is mostly just right around testing time and not all year long.” Her children displayed no signs of behavior problems, test anxiety, or changes to their physical or mental wellness. She believes the reason standardized assessments have not had more effects on her children is that she has made an effort to make sure the tests do not affect them. She commented, “I think that it’s because I make sure to tell them that the tests are important for big educational reasons not really anything important personally to them and they don’t get upset about it.”

Tina’s concerns with testing are not related to the effects they have had on her children, but to overall issues about the tests. The main problem she has with standardized testing is the volume of testing happening in K-12 public schools in the United States. Another concern she has with the accountability movement is she feels there is too much time spent preparing for tests. She commented she does not want her children preparing for state tests. She said, “I wish they could go back to the frequency before NCLB and how the high stakes attached to the tests changed how schools approached the tests.”

Tina discussed how the effects of standardized assessments will be affecting teachers in New York where she lives with mandates set to roll out in a few years. She talked about the teacher evaluation process and how student standardized test scores are to be used to determine a teacher’s effectiveness. She shared it in relation to her son. She shared that she and he have briefly talked about what that process is supposed to look like

and how it is not in place right now. She did not want him to be worried that his current performance was going to be tied to his teachers' jobs or for him to feel pressured to perform in order to help his teachers.

Although Tina has not opted her own children out of standardized assessments, she is participating in the opt out movement by belonging to parent groups against the standardized assessments and the opt out movement on social media. When asked what she knows about the opt out movement, she shared an example from her district. She reported that there is about an even mix of children who are taking the tests and those that are opting out, but in the district in the next town over, there are more children opting out than taking the tests. If she were to opt out, she feels like her kids would have a tremendous amount of support in their school. She thinks a snowball effect is happening where the more individuals that do it, the more other people are comfortable doing it. As she stated, "It is certainly harder when you are the only one doing it, you are the only person, your kid is the only kid, it is a lot harder." A little later she added,

*I know one mom in a district where 75% of kids in the district are not taking the test and she actually wants her kid to take the test, but its almost like you feel pressure to not take it because you are going against the grain of what everyone else is doing. You have to start explaining to everyone why you are letting your kid take the test. In some cases, it has pitted neighbor against neighbor and it has gotten really ugly in some places.*

In regards to the opt out process, Tina described a very easy process for families wishing to opt out in her district. If she decided to opt her children out of standardized

assessments, she believes she would simply need to write a letter stating she was opting her children out and turn it into the school office.

***Carl: It wasn't just that my kid was stressed. Everyone is stressed. This testing is not right.***

Carl lives in Texas, and has one child who was homeschooled her first couple of years of elementary school. The testing he remembers from his childhood had no tie to teacher job retentions. He believes the change in testing that he is seeing now is due to big business partnerships between testing corporations and legislators interfering with education. He has no faith in the standardized assessments currently being given in Texas to evaluate school quality or the academic ability of his daughter. As he said, "My child, as well as other children, all learn differently. A test cannot measure that. I think a teacher can, but not a test."

Carl's daughter was homeschooled in kindergarten and first grade. Their family employment situation changed and they decided to enroll her in public school in second grade. He did not see any changes in his daughter the first year, but as she moved into 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, he started noticing changes in her. The start of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade was the first time STAAR testing was mentioned to her: "It was all about testing, testing, testing." Even her homework included test prep activities. Carl identified many effects testing has had on his child including changes to her mental wellness, physical wellness, attitude, and test anxiety. He believes the changes he saw in her were due to her moving from a non-tested grade to her first year of testing. He explained everyone kept stressing to her how important it was for her to do well on the test. Although Carl and his wife kept stressing

to her how it was not important to them, her teachers kept “pressing on and pressing on” about how important it was to do on the test if she wanted to go to fourth grade. He tried to tell her it was a lie. He told her he would not allow her be retained.

As the school year continued, his daughter’s appetite went down and her stress level went up. She hates everything related to the STAAR test and she does not like going to school anymore. She is ready to leave public school. Carl and his wife are considering withdrawing her from public school in order to homeschool her again. Carl shared that in Texas, a homeschool is considered a private school and has the same rights. They do not have to take the STAAR test right now. In addition to the effects of testing on his daughter, he does not believe teachers get to teach anymore.

Due to the effects of testing on their daughter, Carl and his wife decided to opt her out of testing as a fourth grader. However, there were other factors informing his decision, too. He felt he was standing up for teachers’ rights to teach. He felt he was standing up for his daughter’s right to learn in a stress free zone. He felt he was standing up for the principal’s rights to manage the school in the best interest of the children and teachers. As Carl said, “It was a whole bunch of things. It wasn’t just that my kid was stressed. Everyone is stressed. This testing is not right.”

Carl and his wife did independent research and learned the opt out process and the consequences of opting out. As they started researching, he discovered other people were opting out. He had no idea there was a movement until he started researching on his own and things would start popping up on his computer. Something would pop up on the

screen and he would check it out. That was how he discovered the Facebook group from which he gets a lot of information and hears a lot about what others are going through.

Carl understands the schools have to test. He acknowledged it's the law. If his daughter is at school, they have to put a test in front of her. If his daughter is out and goes back at anytime during the testing window, they have to give her the test. He understands the trouble the school could get into if they were to refuse to follow the law and did not administer the test to his daughter. The school staff could lose licensing or certifications. Because Carl did not want his daughter tested, his only option was to keep her home. He mentioned he did not know what the school would do or how they would handle her if she went to school during the testing window. He has not put his daughter in that situation, but he assumes she would have to go to the library to read or go to another part of the school to do something. He has not heard of his daughter's school making any child sit and stare for four hours as the other children in the class took the test.

When he informed the school, Carl was blunt and upfront about his decision to opt her out. At first, the school administration was, "You can't do that!" Carl said, "I'm more of an 'anything is possible' type of person. My child, my right." Carl does not feel he has had any issues since first opting out. In fact, he has been thanked for taking a stand. He admitted he thought the process was going to be more difficult for his family than it was. He explained,

*I was prepared to go to war if need be. I first sent a letter to the principal and the teacher. The teacher was really understanding, but the principal was really confused. He was like, 'I don't know if you can do that.' I didn't accept no for an*

*answer, so he looked into it. Everyone started quoting rules like you can't keep her home so many days. To that, I was like I will keep her home anytime I choose. As we kept meeting and they learned my side of the story, I actually got support from the school. Finally, it was like I had their blessing to keep doing this.*

This school year, Carl feels like he has gotten even more support.

As he talked about the number of families that have either opted out or chosen to continue testing, Carl thinks more people would be standing up against the testing that is happening in their children's schools, but he thinks they are scared. He blamed teacher unions and other education groups for terrifying parents, teachers, and children into submission. One example Carl gave regarding how fearful individuals are was interactions that he has had with friends. He shared, "Some of my friends are teachers and they are afraid to talk about the STAAR test in my front yard. That is how brainwashed people are over these stupid tests!"

Carl felt that there were not many obstacles his family faced that he could not handle. He mentioned a lack of knowledge on the schools part when he first brought up his request. If he sent his child to school during the testing window, there could be a risk of her being singled out, because she is the only one he knows that is not taking the tests. There is also a lack of support in his community for the opt out movement. It is not that he faces opposition, but they do not have any friends or family who are opting out. Another obstacle they faced is the number of days that their daughter has to miss school in order to not have to participate in retakes.

Possibly the biggest obstacle the family faced was the threat of remedial classes. They were told if their daughter did not take the assessments she would have to take a remedial class for students who do not pass the test. Carl knew his rights as a parent in Texas. He said,

*I know that's a lie and that's not right at all. It boils down to the parent whether their child moves onto the next grade in Texas. Yes, a child can be held back. They can either be held back or moved forward...by the parent. If a parent does not agree with the decision to hold the kid back, a committee of parents, teachers, and the principal is called to talk about the school decision to keep the child back in the same grade. Parents are fearful, they worry about what is going to happen to their child. What these people don't understand is that the parent has the right to be like, 'No, you are not going to do this!' Essentially, the schools have taken the spine away from the parent. I knew my rights and I did not let them do it.*

Carl knew it was his right as a parent to disagree with the school and not go along with their plan. At the committee meeting, he made them look at other things besides test scores to make the decision about what is best for his daughter.

Overall, Carl's biggest concerns with testing are the children. He feels like the main focus of schools should be the children and he feels these tests are harmful. They do not benefit them in anyway. He feels standardized assessments harm the children and they harm their teachers and school administration. As Carl said, "Teachers are tired, administrators are tired, everyone is tired. They feel bad for these kids. They want to teach and they are not able to. They are only able to



teach to the test.” He also shared he thinks the tests are pointless and a waste of money that could be used for different things needed in education.

**Jessica:** *They wanted to take away any classes like music and put him in an extra class to teach him how to take a math test.*

Jessica, a mother of two children, lives in Texas. One of her children is enrolled in public schools and the other child has not entered school yet. The majority of her responses concerned her son and his experiences with the Texas state standardized assessment, STAAR, and her family’s experience with the opt out process.

Jessica does believe in accountability for schools stating, “I understand schools and teachers being held accountable for how well or how bad they are doing. The process and the way it is being done is not benefiting the kids or the teachers.” She went onto explain she is worried we are going to end up with a generation of kids who only know how to pass a test. Her worry relates directly to the change she has seen in testing. She noted, “They are now not teaching kids. They are teaching kids how to take a test and pass it.”

Jessica has observed many changes in her son since he started taking standardized assessments. During the weeks leading up to testing, he cried a lot and had a loss of appetite. He also had trouble sleeping. In terms of a change in attitude, he expressed feelings of defeat. He felt like what was the point of trying if he didn’t even know what is going to be on the test. Opting out has helped him overcome these effects. As Jessica explained,

*His attitude has improved immensely since we started opting out, since he is able to base his learning on his work and on his attendance, which is how I think it should be anyway. He knows that he doesn't have to take the test. He knows that everything doesn't depend on that test. I make it clear to him that if you don't do well in the class, then that is on you. You will have to retake the class, but a test is not going to define you.*

He is excited about being able to tell his friends he does not have to take the test and he tries to tell them they do not have to take the tests either.

Jessica's family decided to opt out of standardized testing after they had a negative experience with the STAAR testing and how the school system where her son attends uses the results of the test.

*My son was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade and he was practicing, practicing, practicing for the STAAR test. He just kept practicing to take the test, but after he took the pretest, they told him that he wasn't where they wanted him to be. They stopped letting him go to recess, so he could keep practicing for the test. They kept him after school so that he could practice for the test. When he finally took the test, I got a call from his teacher saying that he didn't pass the math part of the test. After making the honor roll all year long, my son failed the math portion and they said he had to retake it or be held back.*

Jessica went onto explain that she is not from Texas originally. She grew up in another state and reported she never saw anything in her education like what she sees happening right now in Texas with her son and with people in the Facebook parent group she

follows. As the family had never experienced anything like this, Jessica did not know her rights or that she had any other options. She followed their plan for him to take the retake. Because he did not pass the retake, the school informed her he would have to take summer school and would take the test again at the end of summer. If he did not pass the STAAR test in summer school, he would be held back.

Jessica did not feel any of this was fair to him or the rest of her family. He had been on the honor roll all year long and was going to be held back for not passing one part of the STAAR test. She still did not know her rights, so she let them put him in summer school. The family had to put their summer plans on hold and they had to reschedule their family vacation. Her son was upset. He worried all of time. He would start crying and would not know why he was crying. He had so many emotions that he did not know how to deal with and his parents did not know how to help him. He felt like what was the point of trying if he got good grades, but he could not pass the test. It made him feel stupid. At this point, Jessica started researching before she even got the results back on what options she had available to help him and stop the stress that was hurting her family.

When the scores came back, the family was relieved to find out he had passed. They thought great. They could put this experience behind them and move on. He started 6<sup>th</sup> grade as he was going into middle school. The family received another letter, which informed them of his placement in an accelerated learning class. Jessica shared,

*I had no idea what it was and had to spend time figuring out that it was basically a class designed to teach kids how to pass the test. They wanted to take away any*

*classes like music and put him in an extra class to teach him how to take a math test. Again, I didn't know my option so I let them put him in the class.*

Jessica added that the whole time the school is getting students and families ready for middle school they are telling them all about the great things available to students in the school, like classes on photo journalism and crime scene investigation. Then, they want to take all of those opportunities away from kids in favor of putting them in a class designed to teach them to take a test.

When the STAAR testing came around again and test scores came back, the teacher told Jessica her son did not pass the test and would have to retake it. She freaked out. After everything he had been through, after all of his hard work, Jessica knew enough was enough. She starting getting on the computer and researching on the internet. She found a Facebook group for parents against testing and started asking a lot of questions to help her figure out what options she had available in order to help him.

When Jessica made the decision to opt her child out of testing, she took a formal opt out letter “off of the state education rights page that an attorney from the group had made.” The letter used all of the correct, legal terminology needed to make it happen. As Jessica learned in her research, parents are not allowed to opt out of testing or refuse testing without a reason, such as “testing goes against my moral beliefs.” After sent the opt out letter to his principal and his teacher, they went through their script explaining why testing is important and explaining to her why she could not opt him out of state testing.

In Texas, schools are required by law to administer the test to all students or the school faces sanctions. Jessica knew the school was telling her the truth. If Jessica did not want him to participate in STAAR testing, she would have to keep her son home. She decided to keep him home the dates of the test and if needed, she schedules appointments with doctors if he needs an excuse for when he returns.

Jessica is sure if she sent her son to school on test days, the school would give him the test and make him sit and stare for the duration of the test. In fact, that is exactly what happened the first year she opted him out. She sent him to school with the note that stated, "My parents do not want me to take the STAAR test. I respect you, but please do not make me choose between my parents and my teachers." The note included her phone number. Although the school did not make her son take the test, they did make him sit in the room with the test takers and stare. When her son told her about it, she was livid. She contacted the principal to express her feelings and let them know she had sent her child to school for him to be educated not for him to sit and stare. She went onto explain she felt like he was being punished for her decision to opt him out and punished for state policies instead of doing their job to educate him. The principal stated they had to follow state law and they did not have any choice but to do it this way. She let the principal know she had been in contact with a lawyer and she understands their legal obligation to administer the test, not a legal obligation to punish him by forcing him to sit and stare. She stated she would not put him through that again. Luckily, the next year, the school administration remembered everything from the previous school year regarding their situation and their feelings so the family did not have to go through all of that again.

Jessica did not feel that she received any negative treatment; the school did not bother her and they did not bother her son. She sent a letter and she keeps him home. She did mention other parents are not always as lucky as she has been, stating,

*At each step of the way, parents are told how important these tests are and how your child will be held back if they don't pass the test. Parents don't realize that if they speak up and ask for a committee meeting with teachers and administration that you can ask for the school to consider grades and other factors, so that their child is not put through this. They don't have to be retained or attend summer school, because of one bad test. Parents are scared into letting schools get away with this.*

She went onto explain schools do not want children to be opted out. They are taking extreme measures to get them to take the tests. They are lying to them. They are threatening to kick them out of school. Jessica thinks most of the parents who are being treated like this have children in charter schools. As Jessica explained, "If your child is not going to make them money with test scores, they don't want you."

Jessica mentioned several obstacles faced in opting her son out. First, she had to take time away from her family to spend it researching options available to help her son. Second, she had to be strong and use what she learned in her research without backing down. Third, if a student does not take the STAAR test, the school tries to automatically enroll them in the remedial accelerated learning class designed to help them pass the test. Finally, as schools really try to force kids to sit and stare, she feels she has to keep him home from school. The biggest obstacle for her family is the make-up days. She said,

“There seems to be this attitude that it is okay if you keep your kid home on test days, because they will just give it to them on the make-up days.”

Jessica spoke in favor of her child’s school. Although she does not like that they make children take the test or that they force them to sit and stare while the other children are taking the test, she understands they feel obligated to follow the law and fear being sanctioned by the state education for not doing so. She is thankful for the treatment the school has given her and her son. She knew they did not like the fact she was opting him out, but they did not mistreat her or her son for making their decision to opt out. They respected her parental right regarding the decision that she felt was best for son and understood her desire to keep him from being put through that stress again. A local news outlet contacted her for an interview on her experience and feelings regarding the opt out movement, but she declined. She is very thankful for the school and at no time wanted them to feel as if she was trying to put them under negative pressure or rubbing her family’s decision in their faces.

For Jessica, her biggest concern with the accountability movement in Texas is how children are being treated and the education they are missing. They are spending so much time and money teaching to the test and not enough time doing what they know is best for children. In her experience, people are not always open to listening when she tries to talk to them about what is happening with the tests and what options they have available. She spends time advocating for the movement by talking to other parents and makes recommendations to other families to opt their children out. She shares her experiences with others, writes editorial letters, and attends school board meetings. She

wants more people to work to understand their rights and to take a stand against what the education departments are forcing schools to do to children. She expressed gratitude for the Facebook group she joined, which is dedicated to helping others opt out of the state tests and she wished more people would learn about it. Overall, she wishes she “could help everyone see that you can opt your child out of the craziness and that it is not illegal.”

***Richard: I don't believe in this and I am not going to succumb to the will of someone in Washington or Trenton.***

Richard lives in New Jersey and has two children who are in high school and college. His younger son has autism. He remembers when he was in school the teacher was a respected person in the classroom and in the community. He's not sure that is the case anymore. To him, teachers are viewed more like factory workers who are expected to provide rote instruction in a predetermined curriculum.

Richard said, “Teachers are incentivized to teach to the test, because test scores contribute to their performance rating.” He feels this change is in response to the national movement at the federal level meant to privatize education, which is being influenced by a small number of people. To him, high stakes testing is defined as “Testing that is mandated and determines a student's future.” Standardized assessments are not useful to him. To him, it is important to know how his children are performing and their teachers know this best.

Richard's children have not been affected very much by the standardized assessments being given in their schools. They do not understand why they are taking the



tests and they seem to think the tests undermine their teachers' credibility. Their experience, though, has not been bad. To Richard, the issue is the school's organizing the curriculum and prep around the PARCC tests. Another issue Richard's family has with the current educational climate is that there seems to have been a divide put between the school and the parents. As Richard explained,

*Our one son has aspergers and is on an IEP. They put together a team and they start out the conversation very formal and at arms length. There is no richness to the dialogue...until they realize that we are two parents that believe in educating our child. We believe that his education is a team effort between the team, the teacher, and us, the parents.*

There is no need for this feeling of being kept at a distance. The expectation should always be that the family and the school should be working together.

Richard listed many reasons as to why he is concerned with the testing that is happening in schools. First, he is concerned with the CCSS and the PARCC testing. He is adamantly against teachers teaching to the test. He explained that in his children's school district, the teachers' evaluations are tied to test scores. They have a direct motivation to teach to the test. His children see this and he feels it undermines a teacher's credibility to engage with their students. Second, his belief is that there is a climate in which those making curriculum decisions think schools can be fixed with some program, but education cannot be fixed with programs. Richard said,

*You fix it by the parents who set the expectations. Schools have created a separation between the home and the school as opposed to bringing it closer*

*together. I really believe that the solution is involving the parents and teachers as a team instead of two separate entities.*

Additionally, Richard is concerned with the disparity in how schools are funded. As an example in his state, he discussed how one district could receive \$5,300 per student and one town over, a district in the same state can receive \$13,000 per student. He said, “I think my children, all children, deserve the best education possible.”

Although he spoke to the divide he feels between schools and families, he also spoke at length in regard to the support he has toward teachers and schools. He also spoke on the importance of local control. He shared,

*I really believe in local communities and that they know best how to educate children as opposed to a national set of criteria. I understand the push, the need for rigorous standards, and that we want to compete internationally. However, I think one of the great things about our country is the local flavor of our country. I believe 50 states inventing and investigating is better than one central entity. I really believe that local communities know how to educate their children.*

*Teachers know how to educate children. Teachers have one on one contact.*

Richard also talked about how the public and legislators tend to hold teachers accountable for student success. In his opinion, this is crazy.

Teachers can plan and teach lessons that target student need and curriculum standards, but students have to want to learn. Teachers can plan ways to try to motivate their students to work hard, but the drive to do their best has to come from the student. Richard added that drive happens in the student by “parents creating an environment

where children are held accountable.” In response to an editorial in the paper about schools failing, Richard wrote a letter back outlining how it is not the schools that are failing. Instead, he thinks it is the families and students that are failing. He added, “Until we get to the point that we hold them accountable, we are going to be stuck in a downward spiral in a hole that isn’t going to help anybody.”

Richard and his wife did not start opting their children out of standardized assessments until CCSS and PARCC. Their older child does not take tests anymore, so they are currently only opting out their younger son. When they opted their children out of standardized assessments, they wrote a letter stating they acknowledged the New Jersey code requiring the school to administer the test and also acknowledged that the code requires the student to take it. However, they added it is their parental right and their responsibility for the education and upbringing of their children. Therefore, their children would not be taking the test. They signed the letter, scanned a copy, and emailed it the school principal. They sent copies of the letter to their guidance counselor and the district superintendent. They asked the school to acknowledge receipt of the letter, which was provided. They also sent a letter to school with their child on test day. The test proctor allowed him to sit and read while others took the test. They received a lot of support from their children’s teachers. To them, opting out is a statement that says,

*"Hey, I have message. I don't believe in this and I am not going to succumb to the will of someone in Washington or Trenton. At the end of the day, the school is not responsible for the education of my child. I am."*

Richard shared that both he and his wife are very passionate about this movement. Richard and his wife have organized informational meetings at their local library to share their view and to share with their community information about PARCC. One of their presentations discussed the cost of implementing CCSS and the aligned assessment on taxpayers. He shared the researched-based concerns people have with PARCC and the risk associated with allowing testing companies to collect student data. In summary, they shared their list of concerns, which included the cost of implementing CCSS aligned assessments; the risks associated with privacy and data protection; the loss of instructional time resulting from the increased focus on testing; denial of parental rights and staff dishonesty in communications with parents; and the loss of local control resulting from the federal government incentivizing CCSS and PARCCs adoption through RTTT grants.

Richard and his wife write letters to editors. In one letter, he wrote about the need for districts to allow parents the right to opt their children out. He wrote about how wrong it was to force children to sit and stare. He pointed out an interesting point in his letter. He pointed out the fact that forcing children to sit and stare in the room with test takers invalidates the test as it goes against the PARCC administration manual's regulation for test administration by allowing non-test takers to be in the room during testing. Additionally, by forcing children to sit and stare for long periods of time, the school is essentially trying to coerce children to go against their parents' wishes by putting a test in front of them. They

attend school board meetings to speak out against CCSS and PARCC. They attend multiple school board meetings in neighboring districts to request copies of the other districts' opt out policies to share this information with their district in an effort to help them to adopt an official policy. They have signs in their yard advocating the opt out movement.

Richard noted several obstacles the family faced when opting out. For one, there is no provision to opt out in their state and a New Jersey code states the school must administer a test for students to take. In their state, parents can only refuse. Richard shared his position that the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment provides the right of the family to have the ultimate responsibility for bringing up their children. According to Richard, this allows them to refuse the test without push back. However, he acknowledged, "A lot of folks are getting pushback with requests to come into talk with the superintendent after they have sent in a refusal letter. Districts have seemed to side with the untruths." There is a big controversy around state requirements for graduation tied to students' performance on PARCC up until at least 2019. There are other options available to qualify for graduation, but there is a strong push for districts to require PARCC testing.

Richard also expressed surprise at the level of pushback local districts are giving to parents trying to opt their children out of standardized assessments. He understands one of the things that drove local school boards to push kids to take tests was the 95% testing requirement of NCLB. However, the New Jersey legislature enacted into law that the state department of education cannot withhold

funding from an individual district for not meeting a participation rate on any test. Therefore, he does not understand what is motivating districts to continue to push for testing especially considering the controversy surrounding the use of PARCC.

Richard noted his family did not receive very much pushback in opting their children out of PARCC, but he was aware of other families receiving a lot of pushback. He suspects the level of pushback is a function of the parents in the issue. In their case, he and his wife are both very involved in the opt out movement. They have taken the time to research their rights. They know their children and know their passions are grounded in more than just their feelings. He thinks other parents may not have had the time or the inclination to do the research they have done. The other parents simply know how they feel and do not ground their opt out requests in the legal language needed to force the district to respect their stance. He believes the key for opting your children out is knowing your rights and writing the letter.

**Camille: *They are even having to do these types of exams in gym class.***

Camille, who lives in New York, has three children. Her youngest child is her daughter who is in middle. She has two older children in high school and one of the boys was a senior this year. It is her youngest child who has been most affected by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the impact of Race to the Top (RTTT) initiatives.

Camille was previously a teacher in New York City before moving out of the city with her family. To her, high stakes testing means “there is a great deal at stake with the

test that could make or break a person taking it.” As a child, the testing in her school was done as a chore that needed to be completed. She spent a few hours preparing for the test, really just going over procedures and rules of test taking: “We practiced filling in bubbles.” The tests did not make her feel bad about herself. In fact, she liked taking the reading test, because she was a good reader and loved doing it. She was always proud of her results.

Now, Camille feels like there is an increased focus on the importance and necessity of standardized assessments. In her opinion as a former educator, it stems from the *Nation at Risk* report and the subsequent plan to provide vouchers for families who choose to leave schools identified as ‘failing’. Describing the testing her children are asked to do, Camille stated, “My children do fine to very well in school. I don’t rely on the system to tell me how well my child is learning and growing, because I look at their learning and development in a more holistic way.”

Camille noted her children have had both mental and physical changes in response to standardized assessments. Mentally, her children have shown signs of being anxious and aggravated. They have also appeared to be frustrated and expressed signs of feeling powerless. Physically, her youngest child tends to have aches and pains when she is stressed. Her kids feel like school is wasting their time. They wanted to know why they had to do this.

Camille shared that her oldest son is a senior in high school and has been the least affected by standardized assessments and the accountability movement. However, he was frustrated with testing after the rollout of CCSS and RTTT, which she says are “really in

bed together.” He was frustrated and he was angry. Camille shared an example of a her son’s experience with testing and how it made him feel:

*My son came home talking about the pineapple question on the exam. When the New York Times (Hartocollis, 2012, April 20) did a story on it, I read it and thought it was bizarre. As an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, he was disgusted by it. He is very good in reading; it’s his thing. He started making all of these comments about the test and saying that he just did not care anymore. They had to participate in pilot tests. They had to do benchmarking tests. They had to do state tests. He said that he was so tired of all of these tests and he told his teachers the same thing.*

In their district, students do quarterly assessments that are tied to RTTT. Much like RTTT, those assessments were not mandated, because the federal government cannot force districts to adopt specific things. However, “you can bribe them with needed funds.”

As an example of the quarterly assessments her children are taking, Camille shared one of the assessment used with her daughter. She said, “My daughter takes the Star Reading Assessment each quarter that continually gets harder until the child eventually cannot go any further as it covers material they have not learned or are not ready for yet.” Although her daughter does not like taking the Star Reading test, she has learned to deal with it.

Her oldest son is in high school. He has benchmarking assessments throughout the school year at given points. They are called Student Learning Objectives (SLO). At the beginning of the year, he had teachers tell him and his



classmates there would be material on it they do not know the answer, but it would be okay. They are meant to show learning and growth throughout the school year. Camille felt like he was being told, “It is okay not to try. We don’t want you to do good at the beginning of the year, because we want to show that we have taught you something.” They are even having to do these types of exams in gym class. Camille’s son jokes, “Maybe they will start giving them in lunch! I’ll be great at those.”

Camille’s sons are annoyed over the restrictiveness of the tests. They were not allowed to read. They had to sit there after the tests were finished for days. They complained so much. According to Camille, her daughter has been impacted the most by CCSS. She also has complained the most about them. Additionally, her children were coming home complaining about missing recess. There was “so much pressure for them to do more, to learn more, to show more.” All of this was tied to tougher standards.

According to Camille, last year, teachers were very pro on the standards and on the test. She started noticing personality changes. Camille thinks maybe it was the politics of the school administration. She thought maybe there were a lot of power struggles happening in the school. Although teachers’ effectiveness is not tied to test scores in New York right now, teachers know the tests and the scores are important to their jobs. The stress rolls down to the kids. Camille said, “My daughter is very sensitive. She picks up on the stress of the teachers.”

As for annual state assessments, Camille explained to her daughter the tests mean nothing to her. The teachers do not get the scores back in time to inform their instruction

and sometimes not back in time to even be used in students' grades. Camille shared a conversation she had with one of her son's principal. The principal explained the scores are used to benefit the study body as a whole, but the scores are not used for the benefit of the individual child. The scores can also show where the curriculum might be weak. Camille asked the principal, "Why should our child be subjected to tests that don't benefit them?"

Therefore, Camille decided to opt out her daughter. Her older children are not being opted out, because they are not taking the standardized state assessment like her daughter. Last year, Camille sent a letter before the test to inform the school they were opting out. Because her daughter gets uncomfortable in situations like this in which she worries she might be letting someone like her teacher down, Camille took the letter to school for her daughter. This year, the school system sent out a letter to families that stated if you were planning to opt your child out, you needed to send a letter. Education officials reportedly addressed the state as a whole with a point of reference that families could not opt their children out of testing, but they could refuse.

On test days, the original plan was that they were going to send their daughter to school, but she was so stressed that she was not able to sleep. Camille decided to let her stay home, so she could sleep in and lower her stress levels. Last year, children who were opted out of testing or students who refused the tests were put in the auditorium to read. It was not as pleasant as it sounds. The children came home with stories of being yelled at and not being able to talk for hours. She decided not to send her daughter to school to take a chance of being treated like that or creating even more stress for her.

Camille shared a story that involved one of her daughter's teachers. Her daughter's reading teacher was communicating negative messages about the tests. Camille was not surprised the teacher would have negative feelings against the tests. However, given the size of their district, Camille did not think it was a good idea for her to be so expressive about her opinion against the mandated assessments. Apparently, the teacher mentioned opting out to her students and received flack over it. Camille wrote a letter of support to the teacher stating one of the reasons why she was opting out was to show support of teachers. She went onto explain how disturbed she was over the fact they were planning to tie 50% of evaluations to standardized test scores, especially when they contained reading passages two levels above grade level in some cases. After the teacher received flack for her opt out message, her personality changed. Camille thinks the teacher was under pressure from her administration to support testing or that she feared retribution.

Before opting out became a movement, Camille started reading a lot and learning more about it. Schools were penalizing and ostracizing people who opted out by giving children a zero for not participating in the tests. She shared,

*You would think that small school districts, especially, would be able to do something that speaks out to what could be accomplished if students were not forced to sit in silence, but instead were allowed to be involved in project based learning opportunities.*

Although Camille has not officially opted her children out of test preparation activities, she allows her daughter to skip math homework that stresses her out when it

appears to obviously be used for test preparation. When she is working on something and gets stressed, she tells her daughter to work with her father or brother. If the work is too stressful for her, she stops working on it. Camille writes the teacher a note telling her why the assignment was not completed.

As the opt out movement has grown in her district, Camille shared that the superintendent's office sent over 500 generic letters to parents in the school system, drafted by the system lawyer, to outline the school's responsibility to test and the students' obligation to take tests. The letter also addressed the punitive sanctions schools could face if families chose to opt out. It upset Camille to the point that it led her to go to the central office to voice her opinion on the letter. A central office staff member explained to her it was the district's effort to cover themselves if families in the district chose to opt out in the numbers similar to other local districts and they failed to meet the 95% participation rate required of the expired NCLB.

Responding to a query about obstacles she faced when opting her children out of standardized assessments, Camille stated that about 1/3 of the students in her district are opted out. Her daughter is not the only one; therefore, she does not feel singled out. Although she had been considering opting out for years, she was hesitant to do so. It is a small school district and she did not want to call attention to herself or her family.

As opting out of standardized assessments started to become a movement, as more and more stakes were tied to the test, as corporations were increasingly becoming involved in education, as teacher evaluations are being tied to standardized assessments, Camille started reflecting more on her experiences as a teacher and her experiences as a

parent. In her classroom, she had between 30 and 35 students all throughout the year. Her class was not homogenous. She had students in her class who spoke over five different languages and students coming to school from poverty. As a new teacher, she had the lowest performing students, because the office staff assigned these students to the new teachers. She was never assigned a mentor to go to for help or given advice on how to address the need of her students. Camille firmly believes that under the new teacher evaluation system, as a new teacher, she would have been “thrown under the bus.”

Although she worked hard and wanted to be the best teacher for her students, Camille felt like she “would have been thrown out on her butt” under the new teaching evaluation. She doesn’t think it is fair. She admits she thinks “there are probably teachers working in schools that are mentally retired” or otherwise not doing their job, but she does not think subjecting all teachers to a high stakes evaluation model where 50% of their effectiveness comes from test scores is right. She does not think punishing all teachers or treating all teachers this way is the right thing to do. In addition to 50% of their effectiveness each year coming from the current year’s test scores, states using value-added measures are based on an invalid model of student proficiency, which is another area of concern for her. The proficiency scores of the tests are determined after tests are given each year instead of being equal to attain for all. The bar changes from year to year. As the target is always moving, there is no consistency in determining if students were truly proficient on the content or if teachers showed growth.

***Jacey: When he expressed the desire to jump off of a bridge, it raised, as it should, red flags with the school.***

Jacey lives in Tennessee with her family. She works in education at the college level and has two children. Her younger son has a learning disability. Jacey does not view standardized assessments as having any importance stating, “I value our teachers as professionals. All I need to do is look at that grade book, ask my kid’s teacher how my kid is doing, and does she/he think some areas need more work than others.” As a parent of a child with a disability, she does not feel standardized assessments are a good measure of a child’s academic ability. In her opinion, these tests set her kid up to fail and reinforce to him that he is different.

To Jacey, high stakes testing “means that a student’s grades, placement in classes, a teacher’s evaluation, a school’s performance are tied to the results of my child’s performance on a test.” From what Jacey remembers about testing from before was that there did not seem to be any impact on teachers. It was a measure to see how you as a student were doing. There was no long-term impact for the student. It was viewed for what it was a “snapshot of student learning.” Now, someone has figured out a way to make money off of public education by designing assessments that align with their curriculum.

Jacey’s younger son has been most affected by standardized assessments, she mentioned that he suffers from mental changes, attitude changes, and test anxiety. Jacey stated her son is “STRESSED OUT”. She says that he feels stupid (his words), because he cannot read as well as others. His “self-esteem has taken a hit and this testing has

caused it to sink even further.” He had anxiety about what the tests mean and why he had to take them. He no longer wanted to go to school.

This was the first year that Jacey’s younger son was supposed to participate in the larger state testing that is used to evaluate teachers and schools. It was also the roll out for Tennessee’s computer-based assessment TNReady. The school was continually prepping for it in multiple classes and requiring that students practice their computer skills. As part of the district and state RTI plan and his IEP, her son was continually participating in benchmarking and progress-monitoring assessments. Although he loves his teacher and his class, he has developed a very negative view toward testing and suffers from test anxiety that led him to express a desire to hurt himself. Jacey shared,

*When he expressed the desire to jump off of a bridge, it raised, as it should, red flags with the school. He was able to talk with a guidance counselor at school about the anxiety that he was feeling and he felt like harming himself.*

According to Jacey, “he is 9 years old in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and he wants to hurt himself over how the tests make him feel about himself.” In addition to working with a guidance counselor at school, Jacey worked to empower her son in order to help him overcome his anxiety.

Jacey was led to participate in the opt out movement by listening to and reading other parents’ stories about how standardized assessments were affecting their children. As she listened to another parent of a child with a disability, she reflected on her son's being tested every week to see how he was progressing and to evaluate whether the interventions being used with him were being done with fidelity. Given that he was being

progress monitored bi-weekly in order to inform all stakeholders involved in his education how he was performing academically, she thought more about his conversation with his teacher. She decided there was no need for her son to be put through that. She decided her family had enough.

Jacey shared she had been thinking about participating in the opt out movement for a while. Once her son was given the diagnosis of dyslexia within the context of a learning disability, she started focusing her research on the test itself and what she was learning about it. On the state website, she read information about the test, which made her question what his participation would entail and what it would tell her about his academic progress. At that point, Jacey reviewed the research others had done regarding the effectiveness of the tests. Given the poor roll-out of TNReady by the state department, she crafted a letter for the school to express her concerns about his participation in TNReady and her decision to refuse testing. She hand delivered her letters for the school principal and his teacher to the school secretary. She also emailed copies.

Jacey shared an example of how participating in the opt out movement has helped change how her son feels about the testing happening in his school:

*My son is normally, very engaged in terms of school work and being a part of what is going on when we started discussing testing and what it represented. We discussed what he would have to do [refuse], how long the test was, and how I was feeling about it. He was definitely engaged. His attitude changed. At one point, he was so stressed that he expressed the desire to jump off a bridge. Opting*



*out has changed how he feels about that aspect of school. I've noticed the change in him. His teachers have noticed a change in him.*

Because the state of Tennessee does not have an opt out policy and districts have been increasingly encouraged to deny parents the right to refuse testing, Jacey chose to allow her children to advocate for themselves.

Jacey's older son is 11 years old and in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. He has participated in the state's annual standardized assessments for the last two years and it was never a big deal. He has not really been affected by the testing that is happening in school. He is bright and understands Jacey's reasoning for her dislike of standardized assessments. Jacey gave him the option this year of refusing. She and her husband shared the process with him and allowed him to make the choice of whether he wanted to refuse or not. He considered all of the options and what would be required of him. He wanted to be supportive of his younger brother. He chose to advocate for himself. At that point, Jacey sent a letter to school informing the school that they were refusing the tests for their children, and were given the standard response.

Jacey's younger son has an individualized education plan (IEP) for a specific learning disability (SLD) related to reading. He is dyslexic. One of his allowable testing accommodations is that he is to be tested in an individualized setting. They role-played with him exactly what to do to refuse when given the opportunity to take the test, and exactly what he would need to do when handed the test. He practiced accepting the test, placing his hand on it, opening it, closing it, and telling the test proctor he was finished. When the testing window rolled around, they gave him a letter to give to the test proctor

if he felt chastised, bullied, or otherwise forced to participate. He did not have to use it. On the actual test day, he was allowed to read books or color. Jacey's older son was given a similar letter on test day. He just handed it to the test proctor and was allowed to refuse without issue.

Jacey was proud and happy to say that for the most part their school treated them and their kids with respect. In fact, she stated, "We received a magnificent amount of support from our 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher in regard to our decision." There was only one example of bullying, misinformation, or guilt. One of her older son's teachers spoke negatively to him about how opting out would affect his grade, which Jacey knew was patently false. Jacey showed her son the letter from the district superintendent that proved to him it was false.

Based on the research Jacey did when trying to decide what was the best thing to do for her son, Jacey felt comfortable that she knew her rights and how she needed to proceed. She knew her only options were to allow her children to test, allow them to stay home, or allow them to refuse on their own. There is no flexibility in the state of Tennessee or in her district. She thinks it helped her family's process, because she was able to show the school that she knew the law and her rights. She also knew there were no real consequences for her sons refusing to participate in this year's annual tests. Their refusals were not going to affect their teachers or schools and she knew it was not going to affect her children's grades.

In addition to the TNReady assessment, Jacey has previously and will continue to opt her children out of items that seek to collect personal information on her children and

family that is academically irrelevant. She does not agree with children participating in surveys, which are used to evaluate teachers, believing they are too young and they have no training to know what they are assessing. Documents seeking to ask personal questions regarding a child's home life are invasive and none of the collector's business. She does not allow her children to participate in such assessments.

In addition to the effects standardized assessments have on her son or the personal information they seek to collect, Jacey is also concerned with the high stakes attached to new assessments. The way testing is used to determine a teacher's rating, place students in special education classes, or rank a school is one of her concerns. She also mentioned the manipulation of data from year to year used in these comparisons and stated there was no way it could be comparable, especially when they keep shifting to new tests, new testing platforms, and computer-based assessments that crash, such as TNReady.

***Lee Anne: They have taken the focus off of what they're supposed to be doing and that's teaching kids.***

Lee Anne lives in Tennessee. She remembers taking standardized assessments as a child, but she does not remember her teachers having her complete any test preparation activities or that any of the tests were being emphasized in her schools. In her opinion, the assessments currently being given in K-12 public schools have changed from when she was a child, because there are people who are trying to make schools fail in an effort to open charter schools and make money off of them. She also mentioned the federal government's push for accountability and the fact that they control the funding states need to in order to operate.

Lee Anne has a daughter who is in high school and her daughter does not normally stress about tests. At the end of each semester, the quantity of the workload can sometimes catch up with her. Depending on the classes she is taking, she could have state End of Course (EOC) tests, district EOC tests, final chapter tests, projects, etc. Sometimes all of these assessments are due around the same time, and it feels like she does not really sleep or slow down for weeks. Due to her participation in a specific program, she gets to dodge tests for the most part.

Lee Anne did share an experience her daughter had with one standardized assessment for geometry, which half of the students in her class failed. According to Lee Anne, “She had a B+ all year for the class, but she failed the state test. No one could tell us why or what she missed. This hurts the grades of the kids who are trying to go college.” As her daughter plans to go to college and grade point averages (GPA) are still factored into scholarships and college acceptance, Lee Anne does allow her daughter to take the EOCs.

Lee Anne also has a son in middle school whom she has opted out of standardized assessments for the last three years. As he learned he does not have to take the tests, she has identified a positive mental change in him. Lee Anne reminds him at the start of the school year he is not participating in the “testing madness.” She does not allow him to participate in any testing measure her son’s teacher has not created and he does not participate in test preparation activities. He seems happier all year knowing he does not have to test.

Lee Anne mentioned in her responses she does not allow her child to participate in any testing that is not teacher created. Although she has a problem with standardized assessments being given to her children that lack transparency, she has faith in her children's teachers to assess them and to use the information they get from their assessments to plan instruction, which meets both the needs of the content of the class and the needs of the children they teach. She then shared an example of how a teacher can tell you things about your child that no standardized assessment can tell you:

*A board of education member stated in a school board meeting that he did not trust his child's teacher to know how his kids are doing. I feel sorry about that, I trust my children's teachers. My child's teacher says to me that there is some trouble in math this year. I think she is having trouble seeing. No test can tell you that. A test cannot tell you that she is having trouble answering questions on the board, and it is not because she is not focusing in math class. A test cannot tell you that she is having trouble seeing the board, but she has no trouble in answering the questions correctly at her seat. A test cannot tell you that your child is having trouble in chemistry, because they don't care about chemistry. A teacher can tell you those things. A teacher can help you see what is going on there.*

Lee Anne spoke of her views regarding how people should talk about standardized tests with kids and the trust that she has in children to do their best. Lee Anne said, "Kids shouldn't know the high stakes of the tests. They should be told that it doesn't judge them or determine who they are." She also explained individuals who argue

for accountability say children will not do their best unless they are told they need to take the assessments seriously. To her, the whole idea they will not try their best is “bullshit.” She argues children will try their best without people trying to make them feel bad or pressuring them to perform. She said, “If they’re told here is your test, here is why it matters, they are either going to have anxiety or they are going to see it as a crock like my kids.” In response to the idea of data walls being used to display student work as a motivator to encourage children to keep working hard to make progress, she stated,

*They have taken the focus off of what they’re supposed to be doing and that’s teaching kids, they’ve taken away schools being about kids and having fun learning and instead now they are focused on learning material for a test.*

When she was first trying to opt her child out of testing, Lee Anne reported facing many obstacles to getting it worked out. At first she went through back and forth emails and phone calls with members of the school staff. As she described it,

*We had to go back and forth with emails and calls and when you keep getting the same crap back, the same canned answers, the same information back that doesn’t address your issue, that doesn’t really resemble humane treatment, you start to feel a lot of frustration.*

She went onto explain she thinks that it has become a school wide practice to confuse parents in order to keep them from knowing what is going on, like “the less we know, the less we will complain.”

In addition to the back and forth emails, Lee Anne touched on the frustration she feels over the semantics of whether individuals have to say "opt out" or "refuse" when

informing the child's school system they are not allowing their children to take the tests. Lee Anne was frustrated by the state department of education or the school district administration stance that there is no opt out policy and therefore parents cannot opt their children out of standardized assessments. In her case, she cannot opt her children out of standardized assessments, but instead she must refuse to allow her children to take them. As Lee Anne states, "The whole semantics thing...opt out or refuse, I say get over it."

Lee Anne said the system responded to her request by stating it was state law that children had to take tests. She said, "They say it's the law, and I call bullshit. There's not a law on the planet that says my kid has to fill those bubbles in." She spoke with an education lawyer who tried to explain to her how the state law which says schools must administer the test, also implies students must take the test. Her response was, "No, it says they must administer it. It doesn't say that my kid must take it. It's a law, it's not an implication." She went onto explain to the lawyer and to the school officials that she understood why the school was required by law to administer the tests to students, but her son was not required to answer anything and they could not deprive him of his right to a free public education.

In addition to telling Lee Anne it was the law, the school also pointed to memos from the Tennessee Department of Education's legal counsel Christie Ballard and the Commissioner of Education Candace McQueen directing schools in the state of Tennessee on how to handle parents who try to opt out of state testing. In the memos, school officials are directed to tell parents the State of Tennessee recognizes their parental right to choose their child's educational setting -- public school, charter school,

private school, or homeschool -- and once they make that decision, it is the school's right, and by extension the state's right, to determine the best course of study (and assessment) for the educational plan provided for students without parental interference. In response to this, Lee Anne was very upset. She said:

*Words from the state department are like "well if you disagree with testing, you should go to private school or home school." I cannot believe the audacity of them to tell me I cannot disagree with them and still enroll my kid in public school.*

Another obstacle Lee Anne continues to face as she opts her children out from state assessments includes the miscommunication regarding what assessments are being given and when the assessment windows are open in her district. She feels like as soon as you know what is happening everything is changed and the research starts over. The testing in Tennessee has been in a state of transition where things change from year to year, but Lee Anne also feels like her children's school system is purposely making it very difficult to find information regarding testing on their website. She shared that a lot of information shared by the district is written in education jargon and acronyms making it hard for those not in education to understand what the information is talking about. She also talked about the lack of transparency on the website regarding how the assessments will be used or what affect they have on students' grades. In regard to communications she has had with school officials, she said, "I don't understand what they are getting out of it. I don't see the people who have drank the Kool-Aid getting rich, I don't see the principals getting rich. Why the hell do they keep doing it?"



Alternative activities offered for students who have been opted out was another obstacle Lee Anne faced. She needed to know what options were going to be available to her son. Would he be allowed to read? Would he be given unexcused or excused absences? Would he have to sit and stare? According to Lee Anne, she had to speak to many different people to find an answer to her questions. At first, the plan was to keep him at home during the assessment windows. However, she was threatened with truancy by the school. When she asked about the option of reading, school officials told her it might be too disruptive to the other students who were ‘frantically’ trying to finish their assessments. As she explained in her response, Lee Anne said to them, “Sorry, you just told me that I would have to go to truancy court if he missed. And why are the other kids ‘frantically’ doing anything?”

As far as how her family was treated when opting out, Lee Anne shared she did not feel like her children were treated negatively. They were simply given the options that they could sit and stare or be absent during testing windows. She mentioned threats other individuals were given regarding the potential loss of funding that districts would face if they opted their children out. She did feel as if she was viewed as “that mom” and does not feel welcome by the administration in the school.

Lee Anne also mentioned this unwelcome atmosphere as a general observation she had in working with parents and with middle school staff. She said, “They don’t want parents to come in to help in the classrooms anymore, because they don’t have time for it. There’s no time to let a parent pick a group and read a book like in elementary school.” She went onto say she has never been directly told she is not welcome in the school, but

it is just a feeling she gets and opportunities to participate are never presented. Later, she said, “We are the parents that you want in your classroom. We care. We are involved in our child’s lives and education. We are the parents that are involved in our community.”

Lee Anne shared that she works hard to make sure her kids know she sees no value in the tests. Her children’s teachers do not make them. Her children’s teachers do not get to see them to guide instruction or interventions. The tests are not child friendly or developmentally appropriate. The teachers, parents, and children do not get to see the missed questions and therefore the tests have no influence on improving the instruction given in the classroom or provided to the child.

Lee Anne shared an example of why she is opposed to the types of assessments currently being given in Tennessee schools. One of her friend’s children is well positioned to become valedictorian of his class. He had geometry in the fall semester. In November, he was given the state assessment for a class, which was not scheduled to end at least a month later. He was upset, because he knew he was going to fail the exam as his class had only covered half the material being assessed. As she said, “If the brightest kid in the class cannot pass the test, what does that say for the other students in the class? We aren’t going to put our kids through that, we just aren’t!”

According to Tennessee state law, the second semester classroom grades of students in grades 3-8 are averaged in with their state standardized assessment results to determine the students’ grades. Depending on the school year and how the TN Department of Education has reported grades to the districts, students who have refused the tests may be given a zero for the tests. As soon as the grade card reports come in the

mail, Lee Anne throws it away without sharing them with her children or looking at them herself. Lee Anne and her family never look at the reports sent home at the end of the year.

The idea of attaching grades to test scores is another area of concern for Lee Anne, related to the high stakes environment the accountability movement has created. When asked about this, Lee Anne responded,

*Just the quantity of testing means too much studying and stress at the end of semesters—this is unnecessary. 12 year olds shouldn't even know what a semester is. They do get tired, but more importantly, it is the things that they are missing. Kids aren't having as much fun as we did as kids. They aren't doing projects because there is no time. They don't get to work on building teamwork, which is more valuable than testing teaches us. We all have Google. We do not need to remember a bunch of facts anymore. They need to know how to interpret, login, how to access a source, how to think and organize thoughts, how to conduct an experiment, etc.*

In her opinion, education is currently less about the children and more about test scores. Specifically, she mentioned, “Kids who opt out or do poorly on the state test are placed in RTI classes to learn how to take the test. They lose classes like gardening, Spanish, related arts, etc. It’s all about test scores.” Lee Anne would prefer to have schools give project-based assessments in which students can show what they know.

Lee Anne is very involved with the opt out movement. Not only is she a member of several Facebook groups related to disseminating knowledge about the opt out process,

she is also an active member in local parent groups advocating for students and teachers in her community. She attends school board meetings and was scheduled to attend a meeting with other parents and the district superintendent in order for them to share their concerns with standardized assessments and why they plan to continue fighting against them.

### **Discussion of Interview Narratives**

In this chapter, through careful analysis of data from the interview screening protocols, interview transcripts, artifacts, and the researcher's own reflective journal, I attempted to write rich, thick descriptive narratives portraying my participants' experiences and feelings in order to answer the research questions, which were the focus of my study. Although the purpose for conducting these interviews was to share the individual stories and experiences of these 8 participants, and not to look for themes or generalizations across cases, it is striking how much their narratives resonated with and amplified the predominant themes in the Census. Although their locations, decisions, children, and schools differed, they faced and described many of the same phenomena.

### **Research Base/Knowledge of Tests**

As participants were asked to share their knowledge and previous experiences with standardized assessments, they shared information on how and why they think the assessments have changed since they were children. They also discussed how important it was to them for their children to be assessed to see how they are meeting state grade level expectations. For these individuals, they felt the assessments being given to their children were different from the tests given to them, because "someone figured out how to make

money on schools by creating curriculum aligned with the assessments they created” (Interview Participant, Camille). Essentially, the majority of participants in this study felt like testing corporations and legislators joined together to increase the amount of testing and length of tests given to students in the name of accountability and business. For the majority of participants in this study, it was not important for their children to be assessed with standardized assessments their teachers had no part in developing and had no ability to see the questions students were being given or their children had missed. The majority of participants also shared they did not feel the assessments being given were a quality measure of their children’s academic ability or a quality measure of the instruction provided in the school their children attended. Participants shared their understanding that standardized assessments reflect the socioeconomic status (SES) of the families in the school district. However, one of the participants spoke very much in favor of the assessments, but he was opposed to his son participating in tests, which wasted their time and did not benefit their education.

There were a few participants who did feel differently about the tests and their use as a quality measure. Of the participants that felt the tests were important, they stated the reason they felt the tests were important was they shared a glimpse into the instruction provided in their children’s school. They also felt these assessments should not be used for high stakes measures like determining teacher effectiveness or student retention. There was also a discussion by participants having an understanding of the need to give the tests for accountability purposes.

The information or knowledge participants have regarding the opt out movement is also an indicator of why participants are opting out and/or why they are having trouble opting their children out of standardized assessments. In trying to learn about the opt out movement, respondents shared the predominant manner in which they learned about the opt out movement was through independent research. They conducted this research on social media groups designated for parents wishing to learn about opting their children out or parents opposed to standardized assessments. Participants searched online through education groups and media reports on the news and newspapers. They also learned about the opt out movement through “word of mouth” by talking with friends, family, and co-workers. One participant also identified her child’s teacher as the source of her learning about the opt out movement.

### **Effects on Children**

The analysis of the data in this study shared participants’ knowledge of the effects standardized assessments have on children. Interview participants shared this knowledge in relation to their family experiences with standardized assessments and as concerns they have with those tests. The individuals in this study who are participating in the opt out movement have children who have been affected by standardized assessments in many ways. As shown in the interviews conducted with participants in the study and in their responses to questions in the interview screening protocol, participants and their children were often worried about the high stakes attached to standardized assessments, such as being retained in grade levels based on their performance on assessments. Children were worried about how their performance on standardized assessments would

affect their teacher and how their family opting them out would affect their grades. Participants mentioned their view of standardized assessments as being a waste of their instructional time and as being the cause of increased changes to their children's mental wellness, physical wellness, and attitude. They also mentioned how the increase in testing changed their children's view of school and things, such as the availability of enrichment activities and recess, lost to their children due to schools' responses to the accountability movement.

### **Effects on Teachers**

Interview participants discussed the issue of teachers' effectiveness, teachers' job security, and pay being determined by "one shot assessments" (Anonymous Census Participant). Participants also shared their concern for teachers feeling forced to teach to the test through a narrowing of the curriculum by using test preparation materials, limiting instructional time devoted to the content areas, and a lack of differentiation provided in the assessments being administered to children. Additionally, participants discussed concern towards teachers leaving the profession due to the pressure of raising test scores and a loss of the relationship they were able to have with their students. Participants also discussed the outside factors hindering the ability of the standardized assessments to accurately measure students' performance, such as socioeconomic status, native language, cultural bias, etc.

### **Opt Out Options**

Interview participants shared the same options available to them as were shared throughout all phases of data collection in this study. Participants shared the children's

schools expected them to take the test and most of them were denied their request to opt out. Participants were told if their children were at school, they would be given the assessment. Participants were told if their children were at school, they would have to sit and stare in the testing room, be allowed to read while their classmates tested, or be allowed to be removed from the testing room and read in silence. One participant was told if her children were at school they would have to refuse the test for themselves. The children were then allowed to sit and stare or read while their peers took the test around them.

### **Obstacles to Opting Out**

All of the participants shared one of the main obstacles faced when opting their children out of standardized assessments was learning the opt out process. Participants had to use family time to conduct independent research to learn what to do, what their options were, and what consequences they could expect. Participants shared the majority of their research was conducted online via social media, education blogs, state education department websites, education group websites, and advocacy group pages. Participants also learned about the opt out movement through word of mouth with family, friends, co-workers, community groups, and their child's teacher.

Interview participants shared that communication between the home and school was an obstacle they faced in opting their children out of standardized assessments. Participants shared feelings of resistance from school and district administrators upon informing the school of their request to opt out. Their process involved writing letters, sending emails, making phone calls, and attending meetings. Several of the participants



also shared they were told their children would have to refuse the test for themselves. For most of the participants, they chose to keep their children home on test days to avoid how this could make them feel or situations in which they would have to sit and stare during the test administration times. One interview participant in particular shared the biggest obstacle for her family are the testing make-up days, which resulted in her child having more absences or tardies than just the main assessment days. One of the participants, however, shared her sons were empowered by the process of being able to self-advocate.

### **Opt Out Treatment**

Interview participants shared many ways they were treated by the school staff when opting their children out of standardized assessments. Participants felt as if they were given the run around throughout the process and several felt they were denied their parental right to make educational decisions for their children. These individuals were told they were not allowed to opt their children out of standardized assessments.

Although a couple of participants shared they were not negatively treated by their children's schools and they felt support for their decision, other participants felt bullied and pressured to allow their children to test. Two participants shared conversations their children took part in with school staff, which they viewed as coercing children to go against their parents.

### **Concerns About Testing**

Interview participants shared one of their main concerns involved with the use of standardized assessments is the lack of differentiation provided in the assessments being used for high stakes measures. They shared their belief that the assessments were

developmentally inappropriate for some children's age, grade, and academic needs. One of these individuals shared the differentiation of instruction required by response to intervention (RTI) plans needs differentiation of assessments. For one of the participants, he would like for his children to be able to take assessments in order to show what they know, so it would allow them to avoid taking classes they do not need.

Participants were concerned with the amount of instructional time devoted to test preparation activities. Their responses shared they were predominantly unsure exactly how much time is being spent on these types of activities in their children's schools, but listed a range of possible responses from days to weeks to months to all year. Participants felt these activities and the tests themselves were a waste of their children's time.

In their responses, participants mentioned one of their concerns with standardized assessments was the high stakes attached to these for children, teachers, and schools. In particular, participants did not agree with the purposes assessments are being used. Participants were upset over test scores being used in grade promotion criteria for children, merit pay and evaluations for teachers, and funding allocations for schools. Several participants disagreed with the federal government having control at the local level. Participants felt like invalid tests, such as computer-based assessments, should not be used for such high stakes measures.

Participants shared effects participation in standardized testing has on the educational experience provided to in today's classrooms. Participants discussed the influence of 'big business' involvement in education leading to issues of data mining privacy concerns, abuse of the data in funding decisions, and the privatization goals of

individuals working with state legislators. Participants discussed their view that big business involvement in education has led to a corruption in the system. It appears to be participant opinion that test companies are allowed to determine cut-off scores for assessments, which creates an environment in which students are set up to fail in order for schools to have a need to purchase curriculum and intervention materials designed by the testing companies.

Although one of the interview participants shared his opinion that parents have the ultimate responsibility of instilling a drive in their children in which they want to succeed, others shared feelings their children expressed regarding a dislike toward school and feelings of failure which have led them to question why they should bother trying in school if test scores determine their value and opportunities available to them. Also in regards to effects to the educational experience provided to students, participants were concerned with this type of instruction affecting the view children have of school. Participants talked about the loss of content area instruction and a loss of enrichment activities in an effort to provide children interventions and instruction on how to pass the test.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I presented narratives describing 8 participants and their families' experiences with standardized assessments and the opt out movement. A short discussion was provided regarding how their individual experiences and opinions resonated with and amplified the results of the census survey:

- Participants believe the number of assessments given in their children's school was 'too many' and identified a change in their child's mental, physical, and attitude in the weeks leading up to testing, including signs of test anxiety.
- Individuals are participating in the opt out movement in response to the effects of standardized assessments on their children and factors affecting members of the larger education system in name of the accountability movement. They believe the purpose for the assessments was to label children, teachers, and schools as failing in an effort to privatize public schools, and were upset over the collection of student information and risk to students' privacy associated with data mining.
- The participants of this study have knowledge of current assessments being given in their children's K-12 schools and issues surrounding their use.
- The participants of this study have been affected by standardized assessments and their high stakes in many negative ways.

In Chapter 6, I share conclusions that can be drawn from this study's findings. I also discuss the implications of this study for participants of the opt out movement, educators, and policy makers based on the findings of this study and information shared by participants regarding their experiences. Recommendations are made for further research and final reflections on the work completed in this study are provided.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations**

For this research, I proposed to study how some parents view the tests that their children are taking in K-12 school settings, learn how they define standardized assessment, and describe the impacts of these standardized assessments on their children's emotional and physical well-being that may have led them to participate in the opt out movement. The objective for this study was to provide a face to some of the individuals who are behind the testing data being used to create mandates in public education or being used to influence public opinion regarding the opt out movement.

The findings from the study could serve to provide a voice to individuals who are generally left out of the conversation regarding standardized assessments: the families who live with the effects of those tests on their children. As members of online communities dedicated to the dissemination of information on opting out of standardized assessments, some of the participants have already established lines of communication to express their concerns and experiences in these areas.

My goal in this study was to work to provide my participants with a research platform in order to get their opinions, experiences, and needs into the larger research conversation and possibly into the federal and state political conversations regarding standardized assessments. This knowledge could help lead to more informed choices regarding the implementation of standardized assessment mandates and aid individual state decisions regarding parental rights to opt their children out of standardized assessments. Although this study is not aimed at generalizing to a particular group, it is

intended to provide a voice for some of those who have been affected by standardized assessments in education settings.

In this chapter, I share conclusions that can be drawn from this study's findings; implications for families, schools, opt out leaders, and state education departments and policymakers; recommendations for further research; and my reflections on the study.

### **Study Review**

In this study, I sought to learn from individuals who are participating in the opt out movement across the United States. I wanted to learn (1) who the participants of the opt out movement are, (2) what their experiences were with standardized assessments, and (3) why they ultimately decided to participate in the opt out movement. The study consisted of two phases: a national census survey and descriptive interviews. The results were derived from 421 participants in the Census Survey and from 8 of those who also participated in interviews and shared artifacts.

### **Categories**

The participant responses in the study produced 8 categories based on the questions asked of the participants. My goal in this study was to work to provide some participants with a research platform in order to share their experiences with standardized assessments and the opt out movement. This study was designed to explore (1) the effects of standardized assessments on families; (2) how some families view the accountability movement; and (3) begin to describe who is choosing to participate in the opt out movement spreading across the country. These categories address the purpose of my study which was to provide a face to some of the individuals who are behind the testing

data being used to create mandates in public education or being used to influence public opinion regarding the opt out movement by addressing the following research questions:

1. Who are some of the individuals who are participating in the opt out movement?
2. How are some individuals making the decision to participate in the opt out movement?
  - a. What knowledge do these individuals who are participating in the opt out movement have regarding the standardized assessments that their children are being given in public schools?
  - b. How have these individuals who are participating in the opt out movement been affected by the standardized assessments being given in public schools?

The 8 categories produced in the study address whom the study participants are, what knowledge they have of standardized assessments, the effects of these assessments on individuals directly involved with them, and participant experiences with the opt out movement. These categories include: (1) study participant demographics; (2) research base/knowledge of tests; (3) effects on children; (4) effects on teachers; (5) opt out options; (6) opt out obstacles; (7) opt out treatment; and (8) concerns about testing.

### **Findings**

My analyses of the data collected in this study regarding participant involvement in the opt out movement and their experiences with standardized assessments revealed 4 major findings in response to the research questions.

*Who are some of the individuals who are participating in the opt out movement?*

- Although the majority of participants in this census are white females ages 46 and older who are married, hold graduate degrees, have household income above \$50K and live in suburbs, there is more heterogeneity than media descriptions have accounted for.
- The participants of this study have been affected by standardized assessments and their high stakes in many negative ways.

*How are some individuals making the decision to participate in the opt out movement?*

- Participants believe the number of assessments given in their children's school was 'too many' and identified a change in their child's mental, physical, and attitude in the weeks leading up to testing, including signs of test anxiety.
- Individuals are participating in the opt out movement in response to the effects of standardized assessments on their children and factors affecting members of the larger education system in name of the accountability movement. They believe the purpose for the assessments was to label children, teachers, and schools as failing in an effort to privatize public schools, and were upset over the collection of student information and risk to students' privacy associated with data mining.
- The participants of this study have knowledge of current assessments being given in their children's K-12 schools and issues surrounding their use.

### **Conclusions**

Although each individual participant has their own story and experiences with standardized assessments and the opt out movement, it is striking how much their



narratives resonated with and amplified each other, as well as the predominant findings in the Census. Although their locations, decisions, children, and schools differed, they faced and described many of the same phenomena. The following conclusions can be drawn about parent's perspectives from this study's findings:

- Parents believe too much testing is going on in American schools,
- Testing is having negative effects on teachers and children,
- Schools and systems are not well-prepared to respond to families who wish to opt out, and
- Parents support their own teachers and/or schools, even when they believe education in general is on the wrong track.

### **Parents Believe Too Much Testing Is Going on in American Schools**

As a parent with a child going from the elementary to middle school levels as the accountability movement has hit our school district, I have been disheartened by the increase in testing he and his classmates have been given. Each year, my son has taken benchmark assessments periodically throughout the year to determine progress or possible need for interventions in reading, math, science, and social studies. Additionally, he has been forced to participate in yearly state mandated assessments. He has also been forced to participate in almost yearly field tests for assessments considered for use in subsequent school years. Almost none of the assessments given to him have been for his academic or independent benefit or to improve the instruction provided to him. Instead, these assessments have been used to potentially evaluate his growth and his teachers'

effectiveness, as well as create new assessments to be given to other children in the future.

As one of the census participants pointed out, children currently sitting in K-12 schools in the United States are taking more tests with longer administration times than are required to become lawyers. Camille mentioned the testing occurring in her sons' high school has gotten to the point in which they are being assessed in gym class to determine if they are meeting specific learning objectives. Her son jokes that he has expectations for the school to start giving assessments in lunch. Overall participants were unsure of the exact amount of test preparation happening in their children's classrooms, but they provided opinions that test preparation in their children's classrooms ranged from a few activities in the weeks leading up to testing to activities included in everyday classroom practices. The overall consensus was there has been a narrowing of the curriculum to the point that all instruction provided to children in today's classrooms involves some level of teaching to the test.

Our experience as a family resonates with the experiences of participants throughout this study living across the United States. If state departments of education wish to decrease the number of individuals who oppose standardized assessments and the number of families opting their children out of testing, they would best be served by taking the time to evaluate their current assessment practices to determine what they are gaining from them.

## **Testing Is Having Negative Effects on Teachers and Children**

My experience as a parent has allowed me to see firsthand the negative effects standardized assessments can have on children. In our case, our son reacted to the pressure placed on him by his teachers to do well on the tests and the amount of testing being done in his classes. During the first three 9 weeks, he took multiple tests and the results were posted for others to see. Some of his teachers were telling him how his performance on the state assessment would affect his grades and their evaluation ratings as teachers. After a year of benchmark tests and data tracking, it became too much for him and he began pulling his hair out. He created a 1x2 inch bald spot on the top of his head. As a teacher, I have also witnessed the negative effects standardized assessments have on my students. Although I do not have IRB approval needed to share experiences for specific students, the effects of testing seen in my students has included situations where students have become sick during testing, displayed emotional outbursts, and exhibited signs of developing a negative view toward school and their own abilities.

As a teacher, I have also witnessed the negative effects standardized assessments and other mandates in the accountability movement can have on educators. Camille, one of my interview participants, shared her experiences as a former teacher with being assigned the lowest academically performing students. It was her feeling that as a new teacher she would have been ‘thrown under the bus’ in this current accountability movement. In order to provide veteran teachers better teaching evaluations, their class rosters were filled with the highest achieving students. Although I see a more diverse and fair allotment of students being assigned to teachers in my school system, I have

witnessed the loss of veteran teachers as the accountability movement hit our district. The pressure to raise test scores and the loss of instructional time due to mandates for progress monitoring were reasons given for their desire to take early retirement and leave the education profession. Diane Ravitch (2016, June 20) posted a response one of her blog commenters wrote regarding how testing ESL students makes her feel that reflects the feelings of participants in this study:

One of the most demoralizing moments of my teaching career was being forced to do ACT prep with my secondary ESL students. We would read the questions together, trying to figure out some way of breaking it down into something manageable, and then the students would furrow their brows or just check out completely, and we would all end up frustrated. And I would think, “I’ve spent the last 7 months building a safe classroom community in which students can grow and learn and express their ideas...and then I betray all of that with this absurdity?”

Throughout the study, participants noted effects of standardized testing on their children, which resonate with the experiences I have had as a mother and teacher. They shared examples of the ways testing has changed the view their children have of themselves and of their school. They shared the effects of testing they have seen in their child’s teachers and the damage that it has done to the relationship that teachers are able to have with their students.

Recent education mandates list preparing students for college and careers as their main objective. If policy makers and state education departments are truly interested in

achieving their goal, they should focus on improving the educational experience provided to the children sitting in K-12 classrooms across the United States. According to the PDK/Gallup Poll (2015), “Student engagement at school and whether students feel hopeful about their future are better factors to consider when evaluating schools” (unpaged). Instead of creating situations in which children express a desire to leave public schools or lose their motivation to learn, educators need to create classroom environments in which they are striving to foster a love of learning. This includes limiting the effects mandated assessments have on teachers and children.

### **Schools and Systems Are Not Well-Prepared to Respond to Families Who Wish to Opt Out**

Throughout the responses of census survey responses and the individual experiences of interview participants, there appears to be a lack of understanding of the opt out movement within education departments and school districts, which lead families to receive different treatment when making their opt out requests. Some of this is attributed to characteristics of the participants. Some of this is in part due to the lack of consistencies in policies between schools, districts, and states regarding how to handle issues related to standardized assessments. In fact, there are very few states with policies in place regarding individuals who want to opt out.

According to the most recent reported PDK/Gallup Poll (2015), “Americans have long believed that their local schools are better than the schools in someone else’s community” (p. K20). For the participants in this study, the majority did not speak negatively of their children’s teachers and they were predominantly participating in the

opt out movement due to the effects of testing on their children. They were not opting their children out to punish the school or their children's teachers. However, some individuals felt they received negative treatment by the school administration or staff when they chose to opt their children out of testing. Many participants felt their rights as parents were being denied. Given the support American parents have for their children's schools, this points to a need for the development of a reciprocal relationship in which schools show support for parents and the role that they play in their children's education.

### **Parents Support Their Own Teachers and/or Schools, Even When They Believe Education in General is on the Wrong Track**

From the lens of an educator, it stood out to me the number of individuals in this study who spoke in support of their children's schools and teachers given the study's focus on individuals who have experience with standardized assessments and the opt out movement. Although this could have been due in part to the number of participants who were educators or who lived with educators, the responses for this observation were parental responses referring to their children's teacher or their children's educational experiences and not experiences as educators. In response to both questions, there were participants who stated they loved their children's schools and hated to see the end of good teachers in K-12 public schools across the United States. This supports results of the 47<sup>th</sup> Annual PDK/Gallup Poll (2015), which found that the majority (51%) of Americans give their children's schools an A or a B in addressing the educational needs of their children (p. K20).

## **Study Implications**

There are many implications the findings of this study present regarding the standardized assessments being given in K-12 settings and the individuals participating in the opt out movement. These implications relate to how participants would like to see the accountability movement changed and how participants would like to be treated regarding their place as stakeholders in their children's education. The implications also relate to policies that need to be put in place regarding the assessments being given and parental right to opt their children out of standardized assessments.

### **Implications for Families**

Some of the participants of this study shared the advocacy efforts they were participating in and the research they conducted, which have led to their informed decisions to participate in the opt out movement. They were knowledgeable about the tests their children were taking and the stakes attached to those assessments. They knew the process and the terminology to use in order to ensure they received as little pushback as possible from the school staff when they chose to opt their children out of standardized assessments. This implies individuals wishing to opt their children out would best be served by conducting independent research of the policies in their district and by working with other families who were successful in their efforts before trying to opt their own children out. Additionally, as there were very few states with opt out policies in place, it would also be advisable for parents who are passionate about their right to opt their children out of standardized assessments to work to inform state legislators of their

experiences and to form support groups in their area for families wishing to opt their children out of standardized assessments.

A number of individuals also spoke about feeling like one of the obstacles they faced in opting their children out was the run around they faced in trying to get responses on protocols and on the consequences of opting out. I believe this points to a need for parents and schools to work on improving the level of communication between the home and school. By sharing their support of the school while also addressing issues of concern, it could lead to more productive and positive experiences when attempting to opt their children out.

### **Implications for Schools**

In addition to the implication for families to work to improve the communication they have with the school staff of their children's schools, there is also an implication for schools to also work to improve in this area. Participants of this study shared their experiences with their children's school and several participants shared the negative treatment they received by members of the school staff upon opting their children out of standardized assessments. For the majority of the study participants, there was no opt out protocol or policy in place in their child's schools or states. Participants spoke of misinformation provided by the staff and feelings of harassment regarding the responses they received from the school and district administration. There is a need for schools to work to improve how they communicate with families and a need for transparency in their responses. If there is no policy in place, the school and district might be best served by being upfront with this information until they can put protocols in place for how to



proceed with individuals who are opting out instead of stating opinions or simply denying parental requests.

Given how the effects of test anxiety can affect a student's ability to perform on standardized assessments and an increase in the number of children affected by test anxiety, there is a need for schools to identify students who are affected by test anxiety. The majority of participants spoke of signs of anxiety their children exhibited in the weeks leading up to testing or consistently throughout the school year. These signs included feeling depressed, showing a sense of dread, obsessing over test scores, feeling overwhelmed, feeling nervous, verbally expressing negative feelings toward self, and exhibiting a general sense of worry. Participants also noted a change in their children's sleep patterns, emotional well-being, and attitude. Additionally, participants shared examples of their children harming themselves, including nail biting, picking their lips, head banging, plucking out their eyelashes, and pulling out their hair. Participants shared examples of personal changes displayed in their children that could directly affect their ability to perform on standardized assessments, such as the children exhibiting task avoidance, lacking focus, freezing up, rushing through the material, processing issues, and displaying a decreased interest in participating in school activities.

One participant discussed their child's therapist mentioning an increase in the number of children being diagnosed with anxiety disorders as the accountability movement has ramped up. Another participant shared knowledge of the increase of students being referred for psychiatric services and admitted to pediatric psychiatric hospitals. Schools could use a universal, school-based screener to identify students with

test anxiety and develop cognitive-behavioral treatment plans to help these students learn strategies to overcome them (Weems, Brandon, Taylor, Cannon, Romano, Perry, & Triplett, 2010).

If public schools are worried about their loss of funding or decreased student enrollment due to the opening of charter schools and/or voucher programs, it would be beneficial for them to consider parental concerns as they make program and curriculum decisions for upcoming school years. Many participants discussed their concerns about the narrowing of the curriculum they are seeing in their children's schools and the loss of content area instruction. Participants were upset over the loss of enrichment opportunities and the use of developmentally inappropriate practices for instruction and assessment. They mentioned the loss of good teachers in the profession due to mandates limiting their autonomy and budget cuts eliminating the arts. Participants noted throughout the study that the pushback they received from their children's schools was related to the fear of losing federal funds due to their failing to meet the 95% participation rate mandated in No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Participants also discussed the use of voucher programs and charter schools in their responses. In the most recent PDK/Gallup poll (2015), parents shared a belief that charter schools in the United States are better than public schools with slightly fewer parents supporting the use of voucher programs. Parents want to support their local schools, but they also want rich, rather than test-focused, educational opportunities available in those schools.

Based on the information provided in this study, it would be beneficial for schools to improve the educational experience provided to students by creating literacy rich

environments where reading is valued and children are encouraged to become engaged readers. Participants throughout the study shared concern about reading's place in school during testing windows. Participants shared their concerns that reading was either being used as a punishment for children whose parents who opted them out of standardized assessments or treated as an activity of no value during the school day. One of the participants of the census survey shared their family's experience in opting out and their direction by the school to create a lesson plan for their child to work on in lieu of taking the standardized assessment with their class. The participant was specifically told reading is not an acceptable instructional activity. It is imperative that elementary teachers help students develop their reading identities. In fact, research shows that the more children, read the better their standardized test scores are (Cullinan, 2000).

### **Implications for Opt Out Leaders**

Opt out leaders can support families by creating detailed guides to policies, procedures, and consequences specific to their states. Participants in this study shared that they received information regarding the opt out movement by conducting independent research on social media and online searches. One of their biggest obstacles to opting out was a lack of information and having to learn everything on their own. As shared in the literature review, the United Opt Out website has a list of information regarding the opt out movement and processes for most states. New York has the most comprehensive opt out guide available. The reports of the participants in this study who are from Tennessee and Texas indicate disparities in the information available to these individuals, indicating a need for more detailed guides in these states.

Given the newly authorized ESSA's stance that the state has the ability to develop their own opt out policies, it would be beneficial for the United Opt Out group to promote advocacy of its members to encourage their states to adopt policies such as New Jersey and Oregon. The state of New Jersey recently passed a bill that would allow schools to provide alternate activities for students who have been opted out of testing (Wallace, 2015). For example, students in one New Jersey school were allowed to go to the art room to read, draw and paint while their peers were taking the tests (Harris, 2015). In other states, the children may not be as lucky as those in New Jersey who have been granted the option to attend school and work on alternate classroom activities. In those states, they are required to sit and stare while their peers are testing or remain home with their parents. Although the majority of participants in this study were told their options were to test, be absent, or sit and stare, the study showed the opt out experience provided to families ultimately is an individual experience.

It would also be beneficial for groups, such as United Opt Out and Fair Test, to hold and advertise community meetings in order to help participants develop their advocacy efforts at the state and local levels. Several participants in this study mentioned one of the obstacles they faced in opting their children out of standardized assessments was their worry about whether their children would be singled out. Conversely, Tina, one of the interview participants, mentioned that the movement has grown in her area, because as more people did it, more people felt comfortable doing it. If United Opt Out and other opt out organizations want to increase support and participation in the opt out movement, they would be benefited by efforts to increase advocacy efforts at local levels.

Additionally, a large number of participants in this study were educators or lived in homes with educators. It could also be productive for them to join efforts with teacher groups and share support materials with them in order to help them advocate for opt out bills in their states.

One of the current goals of the United Opt Out organization is to increase the amount of diversity of participants of the opt out movement. Keynote speakers at the 2016 United Opt Out Conference called for the movement to join forces with groups, such as Black Lives Matter, and end the ‘fairy tale’ that the goal of standardized assessments is to close achievement gaps (Bryant, 2016). It was pointed out that if this is the real goal of standardized assessments, there would be no need for high stakes to be attached to them. The newly authorized Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) still includes mandates for accountability in efforts to close achievement gaps, but ESSA does end some of the federally mandated high stakes attached to the assessments (Sawchuk, 2016).

Although this study is not meant to generalize to the movement on the national level, it does reflect a possible need for the United Opt Out to continue their efforts to strive for the diversity the opt out leaders were speaking of in their recent campaign. Although the participant pool of this sample did include a number of individuals from outside of the demographics typically portrayed in the media coverage of opt out participants, the majority of participants did reflect that portrayal. Results of the 47<sup>th</sup> Annual PDK/Gallup Poll (2015) also pointed to a need to recruit a more diverse pool of participants. In their study of the opinion of 3,499 Americans, participants were split on

whether parents should be allowed to opt their children out of testing and the majority stated they would not opt their child out of standardized assessments. Of the participants polled, the majority of black and Hispanic individuals rated the standardized assessments given to their children as important, opposed families' having the right to opt out of standardized assessments, and indicated they would not opt out. It might be beneficial for United Opt Out leaders and regional coordinators to increase the public knowledge of the effects of standardized assessments on children of color and low socioeconomic status students as shown in participant responses.

### **Implications for State Education Departments and Policymakers**

States and school districts are legally bound to follow the mandates of laws, such as NCLB and the newly authorized ESSA, or they risk sanctions imposed for being in noncompliance. In addition to those pressures, some state departments also believe they have an ethical responsibility to do what is in the best interest of the students they are responsible for educating. In response to the recent testing and opt out movement, schools, states, and politicians have chosen to respond in different ways both for and against mandated testing.

A common theme that comes up in discussions regarding the opt out movement is the NCLB mandate that 95% of students in a state or district must be assessed using standardized assessments or else the school or district will not be in compliance for making annual progress. Although many participants felt the 95% participation goal was invalid as states were already granted immunity for failing to meet the other NCLB mandate of 100% proficiency for all students, it is still a requirement of the newly

authorized ESSA (Ravitch, 2016). Although the policymakers wanted to respect parental and community opinion regarding the over testing of students in K-12 settings, they also wanted to respect advocacy groups pushing for increased accountability for schools in efforts to close the achievement gaps. As can be seen in the findings of this study and throughout the participant responses, there is little support by these individuals for the current assessments being used or the high stakes attached to them. Participants were also upset at what they deem as disrespect and denial of their parental rights.

If states want to move forward and create positive change for the schools in their state, it would be beneficial for states to learn the experience, feelings, and opinions of all stakeholders. To do this, state education departments could hold informational gathering meetings with educators and parents to seek their input in response to the mandates they would like to enact, as well as the standardized assessments they plan to utilize in their accountability measures. These meetings could be held in different regions of the state to seek participant feedback and listen to the concerns of all stakeholders regarding the tests being given before making decisions regarding parental right to opt out or how the state will design their accountability measures under the ESSA mandates.

Given the concern participants have regarding the retention of good teachers and the cost of recruiting new ones, it would be beneficial for states to listen to the concerns of their citizens regarding the high stakes and the effects to teachers of standardized assessments. States, such as Hawaii, have been in the media in recent months for having difficulty retaining highly qualified, effective teachers (Hawaii Department of Education,

Employment, 2016). In fact, the majority of polled Americans oppose the use of standardized assessments in teacher evaluations (PDK Gallup, 2015).

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The participants in this study provided insight into the opt out movement from the individuals who are living with the effects of standardized assessments and navigating the opt out process. This study provided insights regarding how schools are treating families who are choosing to not allow their children to participate in standardized assessments. I also learned the participants in this study have individual experiences in how they have been affected by participation in standardized assessments and the concerns they have with the testing currently happening in K-12 schools.

The findings from this study point to additional research that could benefit the larger research conversation in helping to understand the effects of standardized assessments and participants involvement in the opt movement. This additional research could add to the previously conducted research regarding the test anxiety some students face when participating in standardized assessments. Second, I believe research should be conducted on the progress monitoring happening under the federally mandated Response to Intervention (RTI) model to examine what effects, if any, the testing has on the well-being of children. Third, I propose continued research with study participants to develop a case study from one of the states represented in the study in order to provide a deeper analysis of the experiences of the participants of the opt out movement in that state. Finally, I believe research needs to be conducted regarding the effect of reading's being used as an option for children not participating in standardized assessments.



### **Additional Research Regarding Test Anxiety**

The opt out movement is a national movement spreading from coast to coast, which involves parents and teachers choosing to opt children out of standardized assessments. Many parents are opting their children out of testing due to the unwarranted stress these measures place on students. In the current understanding of test anxiety and its effects of the loss of a few points on high stakes testing, there is not enough of a push to procure legislation on classifying test anxiety as a warranted disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act (Chappell et al., 2005, p. 272). However, further research on test anxiety is needed and could serve as an answer to this problem. In 2008, Lowe et al. wrote that one third of students in the United States experience test anxiety and the number continues to increase in response to No Child Left Behind mandates (p. 216). As testing has continued to ramp up and the number of children diagnosed with text anxiety has continued to grow, the achievement gap and the effects of test anxiety on student proficiency levels could be growing to the point that warrants another look at the possibility of creating disability labels for students experiencing test anxiety. This would allow schools the ability to give needed accommodations to high-anxious students during high stakes testing or develop treatment plans to help students overcome their test anxiety.

If possible, research exploring test anxiety should be designed in light of the characteristics of individuals identified in previous research as being more prone to test anxiety. These categories include: later born children (Hembree, 1988, p. 60); children with previous experiences with test failure (Putwain, p. 590, p. 2007); children with high

parental expectations (Wigfield & Eccles, 1989, p. 164); or minority and lower socioeconomic status students (Beidel et al., 1994, p. 177). Additionally, this study explored questions regarding the gender of the study participants, as well as their opinion or observations of signs of anxiety in their children. It would be beneficial in similar studies to look at the gender of the children and conduct research using methods that allow the children themselves to share their experiences and feelings with test anxiety or standardized assessments.

Additional research to follow this study ties to the anxiety reported in the children of participants who chose to opt their children out. Participants in this study mentioned their children exhibited signs of test anxiety prior to their being opted out, but they felt their children experienced relief after being opted out by their parents. However, other participants in the study mentioned signs of anxiety in their children after being opted out. The anxiety their children felt after being opted out reflected their worry of the possible consequences of missing the test on their grades or on their teachers' evaluations. Also, anxiety was mentioned in discussing how children reacted to being forced to refuse the test themselves. A study of children whose parents are involved in the opt out movement might be beneficial in examining how they are being affected in this area and if opting out high-anxious students is the best course of action.

### **RTI Effects on the Well-Being of Children**

Participants in this study shared signs of change to their children's mental, physical, and emotional well-being in the weeks leading up to testing. They also shared concern over the excess testing being done in K-12 schools as the schools are trying to

meet the mandates of Response to Intervention (RTI). Through this process, students identified as having a deficit area are placed in targeted instructional groups. The students are monitored at least bi-weekly to determine any progress that has been made and to make sure the intervention is being taught with fidelity. Their data are tracked and used to help the student self-assess how they are doing. Rana and Mahmood (2010) found that students consistently reported increased negative evaluations during tests they view as unfair or inaccurate measures of their abilities (p. 63).

Participants in this study reported they felt a lot of the assessments used for progress monitoring were developmentally inappropriate for their child's academic, age, or ability levels. If students are consistently experiencing failure on these assessments, this may increase the negative effects these students experience with regard to standardized assessments and may lead to an increase in parents' participating in the opt out movement as they seek to help their children. It is advisable for research to be conducted on the specific effects of progress monitoring on children and the relation to parents opting their children out of standardized assessments.

### **Case Study of One State**

A large portion of this study's participants were from three states: New York, Tennessee, and Texas. New York has been seen in the media as the hub of the opt out movement. It could add to the understanding of the opt out movement for one of the other states to be selected for a case study, as most states are preparing to restructure their state accountability systems in response to the newly authorized Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This could involve the researcher completing interviews of the remaining

willing participants from the chosen state and collecting any relevant documents provided from participants. The data collection for a future study could also include (1) the state mandated assessments; (2) bills governing the stakes attached to them; (3) and media releases regarding recent issues in the state department related to state assessments and opt out movement.

In particular, the state of Tennessee would be a good choice for a follow-up case study. 22 of the individuals completing interview screening protocols for this study were from Tennessee. Several participants within the census survey portion of the study shared their disgust over the 2015-2016 failure of Tennessee's TNReady computer-based assessment. One census participant wrote about her daughter's experience.

*She is a good test taker, because I've always told her that it's a game and they are out to get you. I've always taught her to be aggressive and 'play the game.' This fall, however, she and six classmates spent well over half an hour typing a response to a test question on the computer when the screen went blank. She and her classmates lost everything. They had to retake it the next day with a different prompt. She said it was terrible. If the TNDOE cannot make the test reasonable and fair, then it was a worthless gauge of anyone's teaching or learning. She stresses before every test.*

In this case, the state's newly adopted computer-based assessment had computer glitches, which caused the program to have delayed response times and failure to load in some districts (Burke, 2016). Later, the Tennessee State Department of Education made the decision to stop TNReady assessment altogether and end their contract with

Measurement, Inc. due to their inability to deliver printed test materials to schools on time (Hale, 2016, April 28). Although the state education department failed to meet their deadline for selecting a test vendor for the 2016-2017 school year (Cramer, 2016), the state education commissioner announced the decision to award Questar with a two year commitment to provide assessments for students in grades 3-8 at the beginning of July (McQueen, personal communication, July 6, 2016).

In an earlier study of participant posts within a Facebook group of individuals who were opposed to their children's participation in standardized assessments in Tennessee, a shift was noticed in the experiences parents had in their quest to opt their child out due in part to the pushback for the movement at the state level (Evans, 2015). In some cases, the participants felt little pushback in the 2013-2014 school year from their children's school when they expressed desire to opt their child out of testing. However, in the 2014-2015 school year, a memo was sent out by the Tennessee Commissioner of Education Candace McQueen. This memo was sent out to districts as the annual state testing was coming up and participants started receiving a lot more pushback from the school staff. They found it harder to find support from their children's teacher or school to honor parental request to opt out than they had experienced before.

Bushraw & Calderon (2014) shared that 68% of U.S. parents did not believe tests given to their children were useful and 54% of those participants did not feel these assessments informed the instruction provided for their children. This was also reflected in the opinions and feelings of the participants in this study. The Tennessee Department of Education is currently conducting a statewide survey for educator, parent, and

community input regarding their opinion of the current accountability system in Tennessee and what changes they would like to see in the future as the state moves forward with the ESSA authorization (TN DOE, 2016). An independent case study could produce a nice comparison to the results of a study conducted by the state department of education.

Besides New York and Tennessee, the other state predominantly represented in this study was Texas. A case study focusing on individuals living in Texas who have experience with the STAAR standardized assessment could also provide important insights into the opt out movement. Texas also had issues with their testing vendor this spring, which led to their determination to waive consequences for students failing to meet the benchmark score for proficiency and halt further use this year. The Texas Department of Education cited technical reporting issues as the reason for this waiver and instructed districts to make their own decisions regarding the promotion and retention of 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students this year in lieu of having students participate in further retakes (KSAT, 2016, June 10). It could add to the understanding of the opt out movement for the focus of the study to include individual experiences with computer-based assessments and their participation in the opt out movement.

### **Effects on Reading**

Participants in this study were upset by how reading is currently being treated in schools. For some of the participants in this study, they shared their children's school would not allow their child to read as an opt out option. One participant was specifically told reading was not an appropriate instructional activity. Other participants in the study

felt reading was being treated as a punishment for the families choosing to opt out, because their children were forced to read the entire time their classmates were testing. In either case, the view is that reading is being treated in a manner which could cause children to have a negative view of reading and to lead to a decreased interest in further learning to read. This is counterproductive to what schools want for their students. Research shows students who read more have better test scores (Cullinan, 2000). It would be beneficial to research the reading options being made available to students whose families are opting them out to determine what, if any, affects these options are having on children.

### **Personal Reflection on the Study**

Test-anxious students need help in order to ‘show what they know’ on high stakes assessments or else we risk retaining kids who do not need it, losing effective teachers to other professions over invalid test scores, and the closing of neighborhood schools in favor of opening charter schools. These are just some of the reasons participants of this study provided for why they are choosing to participate in the opt out movement.

Bracey (2009) points out that what began in the United States as a useful tool has turned into an instrument used to determine the value of students, schools, and districts. Researchers have given insight into the volume of assessments being given to children in today’s classrooms as well as reviewed the mandates, which have led to those assessments. They have looked at the funding aspects and the testing companies who are benefiting from the tests given to children. Legislators have been writing bills designed to increase the accountability for those educating American children by adding to the

number of assessments and increasing the stakes tied to those assessments for both the students and the educators. Dutro & Selland (2012) interviewed children in order to gain an insight into their “understandings of high-stakes testing” and possibly the impact of testing on their “investment in school,” but they still did not get to the heart of the matter (p. 342). Research is still needed in order to paint a picture for policy makers and education reformers of what the consequences of their initiatives are for the children taking their required standardized assessments. Research needs to be done in order to share the testing experiences of children in accountability classrooms. Additionally, research needs to be done in order to share the opt out experiences of children who are being taken out of these assessments by their parents.

As I reflect on this study from the lens of my perspective as a teacher, I am encouraged by the data that reflects the support participants shared for their children’s teachers and schools. Although these individuals have seen the effects firsthand of the accountability movement on their families, they are also able to see the effects these assessments can have on their children’s teachers and they understand how these effects change the educational experience teachers are able to provide in their classrooms. I was happy to learn there are other teachers speaking against the tests being given in their classrooms. I was also saddened to learn there are teachers and schools willing to use reading as a tool against children instead of working to improve the literacy rich environment all children deserve.

As I reflect on this study from the lens of my perspective as a mother, I am encouraged there are individuals working to improve the educational experience provided



to children like my son who are negatively affected by standardized assessments. As other participants shared, I have been frustrated in the past by the opt out process in my district and state. I am also saddened by the stories participants have shared regarding the treatment they or their children have been given by their children's schools. Although my son's school did not understand how he was affected by the pressure placed on him to perform well on the test, they supported our efforts as a family to help him overcome the anxiety he was feeling.

As I reflect on this study from the lens of my perspective as a researcher, I am encouraged by the number of individuals who were willing to share their experiences with standardized assessments and the opt out movement. If educators and politicians are going to make informed decisions regarding the mandates related to the newly authorized ESSA, they need to hear from individuals who have lived experiences with standardized assessments and they need to learn why participants are choosing to participate in the opt out movement. They also need to see these experiences and effects are not limited to one set of demographic criteria. This points to the need for further research on individual experiences with standardized assessments and the opt out movement as United Opt Out increases their efforts to recruit new members to their movement.

Ultimately, the participants in this study reflect the individual families in the opt out movement in that they do not reflect them at all. Each participant in this study had individual stories that need to be heard and considered when education leaders and state politicians consider policies mandating changes in education. As one participant stated, 'individualized education needs individualized assessments.' The participant was

referring to the need for differentiation of assessments in regards to the differentiation in instruction that teachers are expected to provide the students in their classrooms. The study points to the need for policymakers to create mandates that reflect the differentiation displayed in the faces of students and teachers in the classrooms affected by those mandates.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Facebook Opt Out Groups

Facebook Group	Number of Members
Campaign to Withdraw from Assessment Consortia	300
Change the Stakes	2876
Kids Are More than Test Scores: Boycotting High-Stakes Testing	452
FairTest	5270
NYS Refuse the Test	7139
Refuse the Test	288
Common Core Critics-National Opt Out and Refuse the Test Campaign	2732
Refuse the Tests-Georgia	30
Opt Out of the State Test-RYE, NY	1846
State Mandated Standardized Tests are Bullshit	3
Scotch Plains-Fanwood Refuse State Standardized Testing	138
Testing Hurts Kids	487
Palumbo Students Against Standardized Testing	81
Students Against Common Core and Excessive Testing	118
Opt Out of State Standardized Tests-Washington State	599
Opt Out of State Standardized Tests-Pennsylvania	1855
Opt Out of State Standardized Tests-Wisconsin	70
Opt Out of State Standardized Tests-New York	5113
Opt Out of State Standardized Tests-New Mexico	55
Opt Out of State Standardized Tests-California	1197
Parents & Kids Against Standardized Tests	324
United Opt Out National	7616
Opt Out State Standardized Tests-Tennessee	111
Opt Out of State Tests Parents/Student Support Against Standardized Testing	332
Opt Out of State Standardized Tests-North Carolina	327
Parents & Kids Against Standardized Testing	9423
Texas Parents Opt Out of State Tests	26339
Opt Out of State Tests-Indiana	3182
Colorado Parents Opt Out of State Tests	1,369
Opt Out of State Tests-New Jersey	10,085
Oklahoma Coalition Against High-Stakes Testing	942
Denver Opt Out	88
Lehigh Valley Opt Out	209
NYC Boycott High Stakes Tests	343
Test Troublemakers	1879
Long Island Parents Against Standardized Testing and APPR	1011

The Anti-Test	176
Michigan United Opt Out	842
More than a Score	3404
Opt Out Louisiana	1720
Michigan Opt Out	321
Terminate Trivial Testing	617
Education Not Standardization	87
Chula Vista Opt Out & Refuse the Test	199
New Mexico Opt Out	796
All Aboard the Opt Out Bus	341
The Move to Opt Out Kentucky	490
Opt Out En Espanol National	659
Testing Reform Nevada	248
Stop Standardized Testing	90
Stop Standardized Testing Florida	16
Stop Standardized Testing Pawling Schools	76
Ellensburg School District Stop Standardized Testing	14
New York Parents Opposed to Data Sharing without Consent	958
Refuse the Tests-Orange County, NY	288
Onterio Refuse the Tests	156
Carlsbad 4 Kids-Refuse the Tests	57
Stop Nevada Standardized Testing-Opt Out	198
Standardized Tests Kill Trees Stop Them	353
Stop Standardized Testing Ohio	949
Stop Standardized Testing Kansas	4
Stop Standardized Testing Arkansas	6
Stop Standardized Testing Delaware	7
Stop Standardized Testing Nebraska	7
Stop Standardized Testing Virginia	27
Stop Standardized Testing Alaska	8
Stop Standardized Testing Washington DC	7
Stop Standardized Testing Connecticut	205
Stop Standardized Testing Maryland	73
Stop Standardized Testing Oklahoma	30
Stop Standardized Testing Canby, Oregon	142
Stop Standardized Testing Iowa	18
Stop Standardized Testing Indiana	69
Kent State Students Against Standardized Testing	1
Stop Standardized Testing Preble County, Rhode Island	92
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Idaho	7
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Kentucky	7
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Massachusetts	5

Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-North Dakota	5
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-South Dakota	5
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Texas	1592
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-National	204
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Washington	84
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Missouri	29
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Alabama	6
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Canada	2
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-International	3
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Wyoming	6
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-New Hampshire	105
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Montana	6
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Utah	6
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Salem, Keizer	15
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Vermont	53
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Nevada	8
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-United Kingdom	15
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Hawaii	5
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Mississippi	5
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Minnesota	6
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-South Carolina	79
Destroy State Standardized Testing	4
Opt Out of State Tests Southern Tier NY Broome County Etc.	42
Parents Have the Right to Opt Out of Stake Testing	55
Opt Out of Standardized Tests-West Virginia	13
Opt Out of the State Test-Indiana	2913
Weatherford Parents Opt Out of State Tests Texas	194
Brady Texas Opt Out of State Tests	53
El Paso Texas Opt Out of State Tests	220
Arlington Parents Opt Out of State Tests	13
Georgetown Texas Opt Out of State Tests	138
Glen Rose Parents Opt Out of State Tests	112
Opt-Out of State Standardized Tests-Oregon	245
Opt-Out of State Standardized Tests-Virginia	27
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Arizona	25
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Ohio	949
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Georgia	220
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Oklahoma	39
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Colorado	86
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Missouri	29
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Illinois	232
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Florida	1503



Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Louisiana	75
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Michigan	125
Opt-Out of Standardized Tests-Maine	585
Opt Out South Carolina	378
Opt Out of the State Test The National Movement	19889
I Refuse-The American Opt Out	3040
Opt-Out Teach-In	874
Sea Opt Out (Seattle Opt Out Group)	100
Testing Kills Brains	224
Opt Out of State Tests: Parent/Student Support Against Standardized Tests	336

## **Appendix B: Title/Information Facebook Letter**

### **Family Experiences with Standardized Assessments Leading to Participation in the Opt Out Movement Census Survey**

Dear individuals interested in the opt out movement:

My name is Christy Evans and I am a doctoral student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I am in the Literacy Studies Ph.D. program with a research interest focused on learning the experiences that families have had with standardized assessments. I would like to hear from those most affected by policies that have been put in place by politicians at the state and federal levels. I would appreciate your taking up to 20 minutes to complete this census survey providing your own thoughts and feelings regarding your family's experiences with standardized assessments. No identifiers will be collected and your responses will not be linked to you.

This project has been approved by the University of Tennessee's Institutional Review Board and was found to be exempt.

To take the Opt Out of Standardized Assessment census survey, please click the Next button below. This census survey will be available from March 14-June 14.

For more information, please contact the principal investigator.

Christy Evans, Ed.S.  
Doctoral Student, Literacy Studies  
(865)660-8449  
cbrogdon@vols.utk.edu

## **Appendix C: Informed Consent**

### **Family Experiences with Standardized Assessments Leading to Participation in the Opt Out Movement Census Survey**

#### **Introduction**

You are invited to participate in a research study exploring the thoughts, feelings, and experiences families have with standardized assessments used in K-12 schools. My name is Christy Evans, and I am carrying out this survey as part of my graduate program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

#### **Information about Participants' Involvement in the Study:**

If you decide to participate, you will follow the link below to a Census Survey that should take you no more than 20 minutes to complete. The questions are designed to help me describe who is participating in the opt out movement, what individuals' experiences are, and how they got involved.

#### **Risks**

There are no risks anticipated beyond those experienced in everyday life. Your IP address will not be recorded and all responses will be completely anonymous.

#### **Benefits**

I hope that the findings from this study will begin to provide a voice for some individuals who are usually left out of research and policy decisions: families. The information you provide may help researchers and policy makers in their decision making in the future.

#### **Confidentiality**

All census survey data will be completely anonymous and will not be linked to individuals. The study records will be kept strictly confidential and stored on a password-protected computer.

#### **Contact Information**

If you have any questions regarding the study or the consent form, please contact me at [cbrogdon@vols.utk.edu](mailto:cbrogdon@vols.utk.edu) or (865) 660-8449, or my advisor, Colleen Gilrane, at [cgilrane@utk.edu](mailto:cgilrane@utk.edu).

If you have questions about your right as a research participant, you may contact the UT Office of Research IRB Compliance Officer at [utkirb@utk.edu](mailto:utkirb@utk.edu) or at (865) 974-7697.

#### **Participation**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise

entitled. By completing the census survey you are stating that you are at least 18 years old or older and giving your consent for participation.

---

**Consent**

I have read the above information. I have had the opportunity to print a copy of this form for my records. Clicking on the button to continue constitutes my confirmation that I am at least 18 years of age and that I consent to participate.

Yes, I wish to participate.

No, I do not wish to participate.

## **Appendix D: Family Experiences with Standardized Assessments Leading to Participation in the Opt Out Movement**

### **Census Survey**

Schools are required to evaluate students using a consistent measure to ensure that all students have access to the curriculum and standardized assessments are the tool that is used as this measurement. The purpose of this study is to seek information on how you feel about the use of standardized tests being given in your child(ren)'s classrooms and to gain an understanding of the experiences your family has had with standardized assessments and possibly opting out of those assessments. The results of the survey will be used as part of the researcher's dissertation and to help inform the community at large of the multiple facets and views of standardized assessments and the opt out movement. Thank you for your participation in the survey.

**Directions:** For the following items, please select the answer that best reflects your opinions, viewpoints or experiences.

Q1a. Do you currently have a child(ren) enrolled in K-12 schools?

- No
- Yes

Q1b. If yes, Please select their current grade level(s). Check all that apply.

- Kindergarten
- 1<sup>st</sup> Grade
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade
- 4<sup>th</sup> Grade
- 5<sup>th</sup> Grade
- 6<sup>th</sup> Grade
- 7<sup>th</sup> Grade
- 8<sup>th</sup> Grade
- 9<sup>th</sup> Grade
- 10<sup>th</sup> Grade
- 11<sup>th</sup> Grade
- 12<sup>th</sup> Grade

Q2. Do you think students in your child's school take too many standardized tests, too few standardized tests, or is it about right?

- Prefer not to answer
- Too few
- About right
- Too many

Q3. Have you noticed a change in your child's mental wellness in the week(s) leading up to testing?

- No
- Yes
- Prefer not to answer

Q4. If yes, how has your child's mental wellness changed? (Open Ended Response)

Q4b. Have you noticed a change in your child's physical wellness in the week(s) leading up to testing?

- No
- Yes
- Prefer not to answer

Q4c. If yes, how has your child's physical wellness changed? (Open Ended Response)

Q5a. Has your child ever experienced test anxiety at any time consistently during the school year?

- No
- Yes
- Prefer not to answer

Q5b. If yes, what signs of test anxiety has your child experienced? (Open Ended Response)

Q6a. Has the school/district made you aware of all your options in the testing of your child?

- No
- Yes
- Prefer not to answer

Q6b. If yes, what options were made available to you with regard to the testing of your child? (Open Ended Response)

Q7. How did you learn about the opt out movement?

Q8a. Have you opted your child out of testing?

- No
- Yes
- Prefer not to answer

Q8b. If yes or no, why did you opt your child out of testing, or not? (Open Ended Response)

Q8c. If yes, was your family/child treated differently when opting out of testing?

- No
- Yes
- Prefer not to answer

Q8d. If yes, how have you been treated differently when opting out of testing? (Open Ended Response)

Q9a. Did you face any obstacles when opting out of testing?

- No
- Yes
- Prefer not to answer

Q9b. If yes, what obstacles did you face when opting out of testing? (Open Ended Response)

Q10. What are your major concerns about testing? (Open Ended Response)

Q11. Are there any additional things that you wish to share about standardized testing? (Open Ended Response)

### **Demographic Items**

Q1: What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to answer

Q2: What is your age range? 18-24

- 25-31
- 32-38
- 39-45
- 46+
- Prefer not to answer

Q3: What is the last grade of school you completed?

- Less than high school graduate
- High school graduate
- Technical/Trade school
- Some college

- College graduate
- Graduate degree (PhD, MD, JD, Master's Degree)
- Prefer not to answer

Q4: Are you or is anyone in your household a teacher or educator?

- Yes, I am
- Yes, someone else in the household
- Yes, both I and someone else in the household
- No one in the household is a teacher
- Prefer not to answer

Q5: Which one of the following best describes where you live?

- Urban
- Suburban
- Rural
- Prefer not to answer

Q6: What is your marital status?

- Married
- Living as Married/Co-Habiting
- Separated
- Divorced
- Widowed
- Never Married
- Prefer not to answer

Q7: Are you, yourself, currently employed...?

- Full-time
- Part-time
- Not employed
- Prefer not to answer

Q8: What is your ethnicity?

- White
- Hispanic or Latino
- Black or African American
- Native American or American Indian
- Asian or Pacific Islander
- Other (Open Ended Box)
- Prefer not to answer

Q9: Does your household income fall below \$50,000 dollars, or is it \$50,000 or higher?

- Below \$50K



- \$50K
- \$50K+
- Prefer not to answer

Q10: Is there anything else that you think that we should know about your family's personal experience with standardized testing? (Open Ended Questions)

## **Appendix E: Email Recruitment for Census Survey**

My name is Christy Evans and I am a doctoral student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I am in the Literacy Studies Ph.D. program with a research interest focused on learning the experiences that families have had with standardized assessments. I would like to hear from those most affected by policies that have been put in place by politicians at the state and federal levels.

I am hoping that as someone involved in the opt out movement, you will forward the invitation below to individuals with whom you are in contact, and who might be interested in contributing to this research.

Christy Evans, Ed.S.  
Doctoral Student, Literacy Studies  
(865)660-8449  
cbrogdon@vols.utk.edu

### Appendix F: United Opt Out State Leaders

State	Listed United Opt Out Leader
Alabama	Terri (State)
Alaska	Peggy Robertson (Regional)
Arizona	Robin (State)
Arkansas	Chris (State)
California	Heather, Larry, Cynthia (State)
Colorado	Peggy, Stefanie, Carla, Teresa (State)
Connecticut	Karen, Jon, Jesse (State)
Delaware	Elizabeth (State)
District of Columbia	Denisha (District)
Florida	Ceresta, Rosemarie (State)
Georgia	Meg, James (State)
Hawaii	Amy (State)
Idaho	Stephanie, Vicky (State)
Illinois	Julie, Cassie (State)
Indiana	Merry (State)
Iowa	Noelle (State)
Kansas	Anne (State)
Kentucky	Tiffany (State)
Louisiana	email address without name (State)
Maine	Emily, Karen (State)
Maryland	Morna, Mita (State)
Massachusetts	Ricardo (State)
Michigan	Heather (State)
Minnesota	Sarah (State)
Mississippi	Ceresta, Rosemarie (Regional)
Missouri	Duane (State)
Montana	Peg, Denisha (Regional)
Nebraska	Peg, Tim (Regional)
Nevada	Angie (State)
New Hampshire	Larry (State)
New Jersey	Jean, Sue (State)
New Mexico	Kris (State)
New York	Chris, Susan (State)
North Carolina	Dov (State)
North Dakota	Peg, Tim (Regional)
Ohio	Jocelyn (State)
Oklahoma	Nikki (State)
Oregon	Emily (State)
Pennsylvania	Allison, Jessie, Pam (State)

Rhode Island	Sheila, Wendy (State)
South Carolina	Sarah (State)
South Dakota	Tim, Peggy (Regional)
Tennessee	Coreen, Meghan, Leslie (State)
Texas	Edy, Catherine, Heidi (State)
Utah	Peggy, Denisha (Regional)
Vermont	Susan (State)
Virginia	Pam (State)
Washington	Becca (State)
West Virginia	Leigh (State)
Wisconsin	Jen, Tim (State)
Wyoming	Peg, Tim (Regional)

## **Appendix G: Follow Up Invitation Via Facebook Opt Out**

### **Family Experiences with Standardized Assessments Leading to Participation in the Opt Out Movement Census Survey**

Dear individuals interested in the opt out movement:

My name is Christy Evans and I am a doctoral student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I am in the Literacy Studies Ph.D. program with a research interest focused on learning the experiences that families have had with standardized assessments. I would like to hear from those most affected by policies that have been put in place by politicians at the state and federal levels. I would appreciate your taking up to 20 minutes to complete this census survey providing your own thoughts and feelings regarding your family's experiences with standardized assessments. No identifiers will be collected and your responses will not be linked to you.

This project has been approved by the University of Tennessee's Institutional Review Board and was found to be exempt.

To take the Opt Out of Standardized Assessment census survey, please click the Next button below. This census survey will be available from March 14-June 14.

For more information, please contact the principal investigator.

Christy Evans, Ed.S.  
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(865)660-8449  
cbrogdon@vols.utk.edu

## **Appendix H: Interview Recruitment Letter**

### **Family Experiences with Standardized Assessments Leading to Participation in the Opt Out Movement**

Dear Census Survey Participants:

Thank you for completing the Census Survey! I am interested in hearing the voices of those most affected by policies that have been put in place by politicians at the state and federal levels. Your responses will be invaluable in completing my research. No identifiers are being collected with the survey data and your responses will not be linked to you, whether or not you decide to allow me to contact you for an interview.

I am also interested in interviewing a small number of you to learn even more about your family's experiences with standardized assessments and the opt out movement. I want to interview persons with differing experiences and backgrounds, so I will ask you some screening questions if you volunteer to be interviewed.

Some of the screening questions will seem the same as questions you already answered in the Census Survey. This is because your survey responses are completely anonymous and are not linked to your name.

If you are willing to consider participating in an interview, please click the Yes button below and read the Informed Consent form. If you decide to participate, please sign the consent form and complete the screening questions that follow.

As I identify individuals with different backgrounds and experiences, I will begin contacting possible interviewees.

I appreciate your considering this request to be interviewed. For more information, please feel free to contact me:

Christy Evans, Ed.S.  
Doctoral Student, Literacy Studies  
(865)660-8449  
cbrogdon@vols.utk.edu

I have read the above information. I have had the opportunity to print a copy of this form for my records. Clicking on the button to continue constitutes my confirmation that I am at least 18 years of age and that I would like to learn more about the interview portion of the study.

Yes, I would like to learn more about the interview portion of the study.

No, I am not interested in being interviewed.

## **Appendix I: Informed Consent**

### **Family Experiences with Standardized Assessments Leading to Participation in the Opt Out Movement Interview**

#### **Introduction**

You are invited to participate in a research project designed to understand the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of families with regard to standardized assessments used in K-12 schools. You may participate in this study if you have completed the Opt Out Census Survey.

#### **Information about Participants' Involvement in the Study**

If you agree to participate in the interview portion of the study, you will be asked to complete screening items that may seem similar to questions asked in the demographic survey. Your answers to the survey questions were anonymous and are in no way associated with you. In order for me to select individuals with different experiences and backgrounds, you will be asked to answer a few screening items. up to 6 participants will be selected to be interviewed.

If you are interviewed, we will set up a time that is convenient to you, and conduct the interview using phones, Skype, or Zoom. The interview will take up to 1 hour, and you will be asked to share more in-depth information with me about your family's experiences with standardized testing and your decisions about participating in the opt out movement. You will also be asked if you wish to share with me any documents or other artifacts (such as correspondence with the school, social media posts, etc.) that will add details to your story.

The interviews will be audio-recorded, to help me be sure to record your story accurately, and I will type a transcript of the recording. I will send you a copy of the transcript, and ask you to let me know if it accurately conveys our conversation. Once we agree that the transcript is accurate, I will destroy the recording of our conversation.

#### **Risks**

This study is considered minimal risk, in that it poses no foreseeable risks greater than those encountered in everyday life. The risk of breach of confidentiality exists, and measures have been put in place to protect against this; these are explained below.

#### **Benefits**

I hope that the findings from this study will begin to provide a voice for some individuals who are usually left out of research and policy decisions: families. The information you provide may help researchers and policy makers in their decision making in the future.

#### **Confidentiality**

The audio recording of our conversation will be stored on my password-protected computer, and I and my advisor are the only ones who will have access to them. In typing the transcripts, I will use pseudonyms rather than real names for any individuals, schools, or school systems you talk about. The audio recording will be destroyed once we agree that the transcripts are accurate.

The transcripts and the report I write will be stored on my password-protected computer, as well as on a backup disc that my advisor will store in a locked cabinet in her office. We are the only ones who will have access to these files.

Your signed consent forms and screening questions will also be stored as described above; however, these will be stored on a separate disc so that the interview and document data cannot be linked to your name.

### **Contact**

If you have any questions regarding the study or the consent form, please contact me at [cbrogdon@vols.utk.edu](mailto:cbrogdon@vols.utk.edu) or (865) 660-8449, or my advisor, Colleen Gilrane, at [cgilrane@utk.edu](mailto:cgilrane@utk.edu).

If you have questions about your right as a research participant, you may contact the UT Office of Research IRB Compliance Officer at [utkirb@utk.edu](mailto:utkirb@utk.edu) or at (865) 974-7697.

### **Participation**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

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### **Consent**

I have read the above information. I have had the opportunity to print a copy of this form for my records. By clicking the "I wish to participate" button below, I confirm that I understand the purpose of the research and the study procedures. I confirm that I am at least 18 years of age, and that my signature below indicates my willingness to participate.

Type full name:

Date:

Yes, I wish to participate

No, I do not wish to participate



## **Appendix J: Interview Screening Protocol**

### **Opt Out of Standardized Assessment in K-12 Schools Interview**

I want to interview persons with differing experiences and backgrounds, so I am asking you to complete some screening questions. Some of the screening questions will seem the same as questions you already answered in the Census Survey. This is because your survey responses are completely anonymous, and are not linked to your name. Thank you for taking the time to provide this information so that I may select individuals whose experiences and backgrounds are as different as possible.

Q1. What does the phrase ‘high stakes testing’ mean to you? (Open Ended Response)

Q2a. How do you think testing has changed since you were in school? (Open Ended Response)

Q2b. Why do you think testing has changed in this manner since you were in school? (Open Ended Response)

Q3. How important is it to you that your child’s school regularly assesses whether or not your child is meeting the statewide expectations for the grade level? (Open Ended Response)

Q4. What standardized tests does your child’s school administer? (Open Ended Question)

Q5a. Have you noticed a change in your child’s mental wellness in the week(s) leading up to testing? (Closed Response)

Q5b. If yes, how has your child’s mental wellness changed in the week(s) leading up to testing? (Open Ended Response)

Q6a. Have you noticed a change in your child’s physical wellness in the week(s) leading up to testing? (Closed Response)

Q6b. If yes, how has your child’s physical wellness changed in the week(s) leading up to testing? (Open Ended Response)

Q7a. Have you noticed a change in your child’s attitude toward school changed in regards to testing? (Closed Response)

Q7b. If yes, how has your child’s attitude toward school changed in regards to testing? (Open Ended Response)

Q8. How well do standardized assessments measure the quality of education offered in schools? (Open Ended Response)

Q9. How well do standardized assessments measure your child's academic ability? (Open Ended Response)

Q10. How much time does your child spend in school preparing for standardized assessments? (Open Ended Response)

Q11. What are your family's experiences with standardized assessments in K-12 schools? (Open Ended Response)

Q12a. Has your child experienced any signs of test anxiety in regards to the testing that is being done in K-12 schools? (Closed Response)

Q12b. If yes, what signs of test anxiety has your child experienced? (Open Ended Response)

Q13a. Has the school/district made you aware of all your options in the testing of your child? (Closed Response)

Q13b. If yes, what options were made available to you in regards to the testing of your child? (Open Ended Response)

Q14a. Have you opted your child out of testing?

- No
- Yes
- Prefer not to answer

Q14b. If yes, was your family/child treated differently when opting out of testing?

- No
- Yes
- Prefer not to answer

Q14c. If yes, how have you been treated differently when opting out of testing? (Open Ended Response)

Q15a. Did you face any obstacles when opting out of testing?

- No
- Yes
- Prefer not to answer

Q15b. If yes, what obstacles did you face when opting out of testing? (Open Ended Response)

Q16. What are your major concerns about testing? (Open Ended Response)

Q17. Are there any additional things that you wish to share about standardized testing? (Open Ended Response)

Q18. Please tell me the best way(s) to contact you if you are selected to be interviewed (e.g, email and/or telephone number). (Open Ended Response)

## **Appendix K: Interview Informed Consent**

### **Family Experiences with Standardized Assessments Leading to Participation in the Opt Out Movement Interview**

#### **Introduction**

You are invited to participate in a research project designed to understand the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of families with regard to standardized assessments used in K-12 schools. You may participate in this study if you are a member of a Facebook group designated to opting out of standardized assessments or are recruited by other study participants and are 18 years of age or older.

#### **Information about Participants' Involvement in the Study**

At the completion of Phase I (survey) of the study, participants were asked if they would be willing to participate in follow-up interviews. If you agree to participate in the interview portion of the study, you will be asked to complete screening items that may seem similar to questions asked in the demographic survey. Your answers to those questions were anonymous and are in no way associated with you. In order to select individuals with varied experiences and backgrounds, willing participants will answer a few screening items. A minimum of 6 participants will be selected to be interviewed. At the conclusion of the interview, participants will be asked if they are willing to share any artifacts related to their experience, which might aid in the understanding of their experience (i.e., communications with the school, press releases, Facebook posts, etc.). This is not a requirement for participation in the study. All participant information will be kept confidential. I will eventually write my dissertation and articles based on what I learn that may be published or presented at conferences.

#### **Risks**

The study records will be kept strictly confidential, and there are no anticipated risks of participation greater than those already encountered in everyday life or as a member of a Facebook group.

#### **Benefits**

The findings from the proposed study will serve to provide a voice for individuals who are generally left out of the conversation regarding standardized testing and that is the families who live with the effects of these tests. As members of the a Facebook group page, the participants have already established a line of communication in which they are expressing their concerns and experiences. This study provides the participants with a research platform to further get their opinions, experiences, and needs into the larger research conversation and possibly into the state and federal politician conversations regarding standardized assessments being used in schools. This knowledge may help lead to more informed choices regarding the further implementation of standardized assessment mandates.

**Confidentiality**

If I use any direct quotations from any posts or comments, I will use pseudonyms rather than real names to protect your confidentiality. For any information taken from documents provided by you or in Facebook posts, I will pay attention to the levels of permission, or privacy settings, of posts, and will only use direct quotes from posts that are set to "public."

**Contact**

If you have any questions regarding the study or the consent form, you may contact me, Christy Evans [cbrogdon@vols.utk.edu or (865)660-8449] or my dissertation committee chair, Dr. Colleen Gilrane [cgilrane@utk.edu]. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Tennessee Office of Research Compliance at (865) 974-7697.

**Participation**

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty by sending me a note via email or FB message, or telephoning. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, I will destroy the data associated with you. By posting a comment agreeing to participate, you are indicating that you understand the information, that you are 18 years of age or older, and that you are agreeing to participate in this study.

If you are willing to participate, and to allow me to interview you, please sign and return one copy of the forms to me.

Participant Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix L: Interview Protocol**

### **Opt Out of Standardized Assessment in K-12 Schools Interview**

Thank you so much for offering your time today. I appreciate your giving me all of the information in the screening questions, and I believe your story is an important one to tell about testing and opting out. I have some questions that I hope will lead to a rich conversation, feel free to elaborate on anything or to tell me anything you believe to be important, even if I don't ask. Remember that you are also free not to answer any question you wish, or to stop the interview at any time.

1. How has your family experienced standardized assessments? (Open Ended Responses)
2. What led you to participate in the opt out movement? (Open Ended Response)
3. Have you opted your child out of standardized assessments? (Closed Response)
4. Are there any additional things that you wish to share about standardized testing? (Open Ended Response)
5. If needed, would you be willing for me to contact you again for a follow-up interview? (Closed Response)
6. Are there documents or any other artifacts (such as correspondence from the school or social media posts) that you want to share with me, to provide even more detail about your story? (Closed Response)

### **Appendix M: Participation Thank You Email from Qualtrics**

Thank you so much for participating in my study. You have no idea how much it means to me to be able to hear your stories and your family's experience with standardized testing and the opt out movement. My hope is to be able to paint a picture of the experiences with standardized testing and the opt out movement of the participants in this study.

I feel my son's story has value. I feel my students' stories and experiences have value, too. My dissertation is one way that I can share those while hopefully giving a voice to your family and others. Again, I thank you so much for your help in this academic journey and for agreeing to potentially be interviewed. I will contact interview participants soon with further information regarding this study.

Thank you so much for your time,

Christy Lee Evans, EdS.  
Doctoral Student, UTK Literacy Studies  
cbrogdon@vols.utk.edu

## **Vita**

Christy L. Evans was born and raised in Lenoir City, Tennessee. She graduated from Tennessee Technological University in 2007, earning a Bachelors of Arts degree in Multidisciplinary Studies K-8 with an additional endorsement in English as a Second Language (ESL) PreK-12. In 2007, she added an additional endorsement for Early Childhood PreK-4 and she was hired to teach ESL for students in Kindergarten-4th grade at Alcoa Elementary School in Alcoa, Tennessee. She graduated from the University of Tennessee in 2010, earning a Masters of Science degree in Reading Education. She added the endorsement for Reading Specialist PreK-12. She graduated from the University of Tennessee in 2012, earning a Specialist in Education degree in Reading Education. In 2014, she was named the East Tennessee TNTESOL Teacher of the Year. In 2015, she became a Teacher Partner/Instructional Coach at Alcoa Elementary School. Upon acceptance of this dissertation, Christy will have earned a PhD in Teacher Education with a concentration in Literacy Studies from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in 2016.