



***In Their Own Words:
Students and Parents
Weigh-in on Education
in America***

A White Paper on Testing

Spring | 2016

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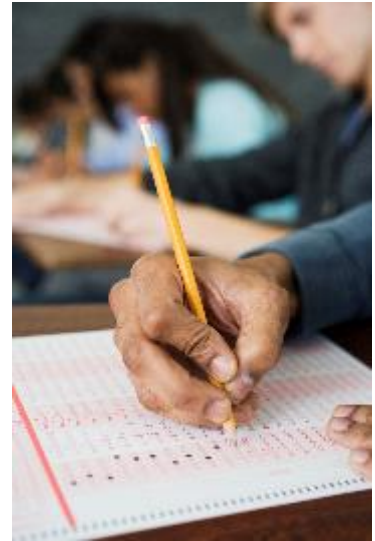


Parents and Students Have Conflicted Views about Statewide Tests and Want More Choice in How Students Are Evaluated

The enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) a decade and a half ago ushered in the era of high-stakes standardized testing and prompted contentious discord among much of the education community. While the recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, now known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), shifts authority for school performance and accountability back to districts and states, testing is still mandated, albeit with more flexibility in both how tests are implemented and how they are used as part of accountability measures.

Even as the federal government continues to develop the regulations that will bring ESSA to life (the Act does not go into effect until the 2017-2018 school year), states are contemplating and even passing legislation that will redefine and redesign their accountability systems.

Amidst all the discussion and debate, the opinions of the very people who these accountability systems and tests were intended to benefit—students and their parents—have been woefully missing. This paper shares students' and parents' conflicted views about statewide tests, including concerns about the value of the information they provide on the performance of individual students, as well as on the performance of teachers and schools. Data findings are based on a YouGov survey of 704 parents of 4th-12th graders and their children and reveals that, despite the near-universal presence of standardized tests, few parents believe the tests are addressing their stated goals, and many students feel it is acceptable to give themselves a pass on being good test-takers.



Fewer than half of parents say statewide standardized tests show how much their child has learned in school.

The majority of parents (albeit a fairly slim majority, at 61%) feel confident that they understand the role of state standardized tests as they relate to education. However, fewer believe the tests are demonstrating student learning or how well schools or teachers are doing:

- Only 36% say statewide tests show how much their child has learned in school,
- Only 34% say the tests show if their child's school is doing a good job,
- Even fewer (29%) say the tests show if their child's teachers are doing a good job.

It is generally understood that accountability systems are intended to (among other things) empower parents with an understanding of how well their children's schools are performing. Yet despite years of labeling and ranking schools, school performance remains an unknown to most parents: fewer than half (46%) say they are familiar with how the academic performance of students at their child's school compares to other schools in their state. At the same time, support for using statewide tests as a source for this comparison is even less with only 31% saying the tests are a good way to compare schools across their state.

Still, a majority of parents see some value in statewide tests.

Although the majority of parents do not feel that statewide tests show how much their child has learned or that they are a good way to compare schools, they do not go as far as to say the tests are irrelevant or



completely unrelated to what is learned in school. A very low percentage of parents say “the tests don’t matter – as far as I know, the results aren’t used for anything related to my child” (16%), and a similarly low percentage say that the tests cover things that are not taught in school (14%). Students themselves are slightly more likely to hold the latter view, with 21% of 4th – 12th graders saying the tests are about things they haven’t learned. And despite widespread media attention about the parental “opt-out” movement, only four percent of parents say they have had their child stay home from school instead of taking their state’s tests.

Lack of support for testing may impact student effort.

It isn’t a great leap to suggest that parents’ lack of belief that statewide tests demonstrate student and school performance has an impact on students’ commitment to work hard on these tests. While a majority of students say they give the tests their best effort (56%), this sentiment is far from universal. Parents are aware of this attitude, with a similar number (51%) saying that their child gives the tests their best effort.

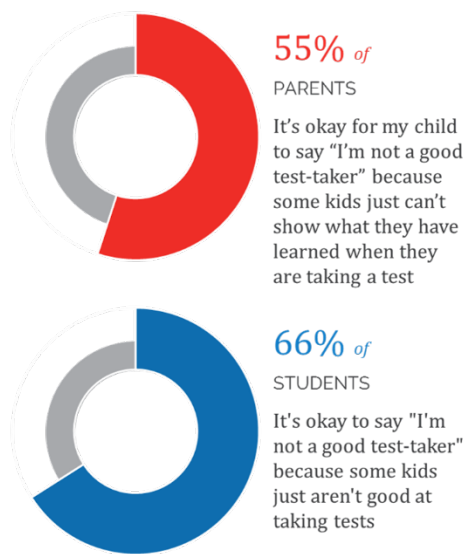
Overall, parents and students appear to have conflicted attitudes about test-taking in general as well as about statewide tests in particular. Test-taking itself is viewed as a skill – one at which it’s not necessary to excel. More than half of parents (55%) agree that “it’s okay for my child to say ‘I’m not a good test-taker’ because some kids just can’t show what they have learned when they are taking a test.” Even more children hold this view, with two-thirds of 4th-12th graders (66%) agreeing.

Furthermore, parents want flexibility in how students are evaluated. Eight in 10 parents (83%) say that “teachers giving students choices about how they demonstrate what they have learned” is absolutely or very important.

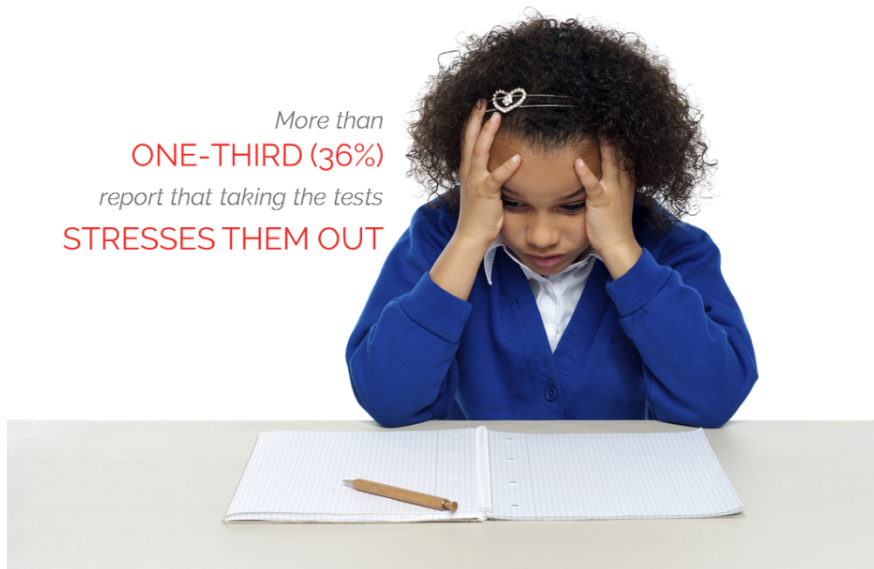
More students describe statewide tests as hard than easy.

One-third of students (34%) say statewide tests are hard. In contrast, half as many (17%) say the tests are easy. More than one-third (36%) report that taking the tests stresses them out. However, even more students (40%) say “I like to see how well I can do on the tests.”

High school students are as likely as elementary/middle school students to describe the tests as hard (32% vs. 35%). Yet older students are more likely than younger students to report that taking the tests stresses them out (39% vs. 33%).



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A slim majority of parents and students discuss the test results with each other; even fewer discuss these with school personnel.

About half of parents (54%) and students (59%) say

they have talked with each other about statewide test results. Conversations with teachers or other adults at school are less common with 32% of parents and 27% of students saying they have spoken with a teacher or other adult at school about their child's/their test results.

Low-income and high-income parents share many similar views about standardized tests, although differences exist in understanding tests' meaning and attitudes about test-taking.

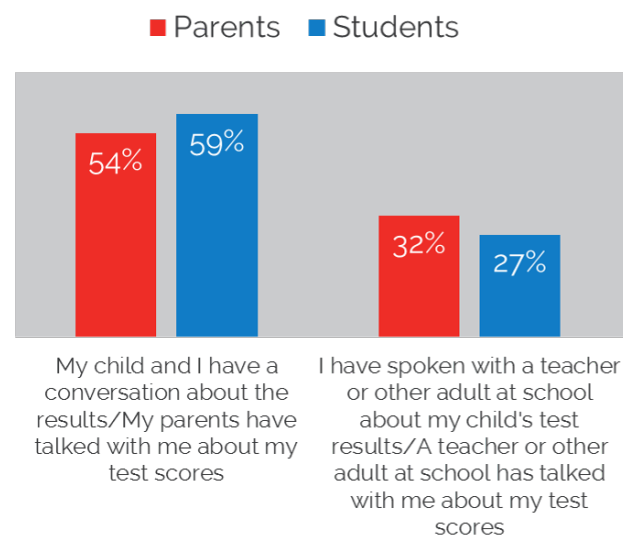
Overall, low-income parents (household income less than \$25,000) and high-income parents (household income \$100,000 or more) share many similar experiences with statewide standardized tests. Low-income and high-income parents are as likely to say their child gives the tests their best effort (50% vs. 55%), to talk with their child about the results (50% vs. 56%), to talk with a teacher about the results (31% vs. 36%), and to say that statewide tests show how much their child has learned in school (35% vs. 34%).

However, low-income parents do differ from high-income parents in two areas: understanding the role of state standardized tests and the impact on their school's performance, and their attitudes about having flexibility in how students are evaluated. Low-income parents are **less likely** than high-income parents to say they are confident that they understand the role of state standardized tests (52% vs. 71%) and are less likely to be familiar with how the academic performance of students at their child's school compares to other schools in their state (32% vs. 58%). Low-income parents are more likely than high-income parents to say that teachers giving students choices about how they demonstrate what they have learned is important (89% vs. 77%).

Our Take:

This is a moment in time—one that will likely not arise again for years or even decades—that should be capitalized on to build accountability systems that unite instead of divide. Under ESSA, student achievement on state tests will remain a significant part of accountability systems, but states are allowed to incorporate additional factors when determining and publicizing school performance. This is a good thing: our data show that parents and students want student achievement measured in multiple ways and by extension, judgments on school performance that are based on multiple measures are sure to be more meaningful than narrowly defined labels and ranking systems.

Policy makers, and the businesses that consult with them and that provide measurement tools and assessment instruments should use this transition period from NCLB/RTTP (Race to the Top) to ESSA to ensure that the voices and views of all stakeholders—including students and parents—are included in the development and communication of new accountability systems, in whole and in part.





We stress the need for communication because we know that stakeholders are conflicted over testing. On the one hand, parents and students want to know how students are doing in school; well-designed tests that connect to the curriculum can validate this and inform personalized learning plans for students. On the other hand, so many mixed messages are coming from so many different directions; some say “opt out” based on big-brother concerns, some claim “developmental inappropriateness,” some say state and other standardized tests don’t reflect learning standards, while still others reject state and standardized tests outright because they don’t believe in current (or potentially any) learning standards. And while test anxiety can certainly be real, the idea that test-taking is an inherent skill that some people either have or don’t have has minimal basis in empirical research.

All stakeholders – from children and parents, to educators and policy makers, to Boards of Education and the communities that are asked to fund their local schools – deserve an accountability system that includes measures that are both understandable and meaningful. The only way to accomplish this is to ask and then listen to the needs, wants and opinions of these stakeholders.

For more information about this research, or on YouGov’s research capabilities in the fields of youth, family, and education, please contact:

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METHOD

The survey was conducted online between September 16 – 28, 2015 among 704 U.S. parents of children in grades 4 – 12 and their 4th – 12th grade child. Sample balancing was applied to ensure results were representative of U.S. households with children in grades 4 – 12.