

Father cries foul after city school's opt-outs disappear

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In 2016, 155 students at Rochester's Wilson Foundation Academy refused to take the state English exam. Last week, the opt-out ranks were down to one single student, and that girl's father is accusing the school of using coercion to make it happen.

Raif Zenelovic's daughter, a fifthgrader, was the only student out of more than 300 students in grades 3-8 at Wilson Foundation who didn't take the state English test.

School Principal Deasure Matthew attributed the marked increase in participation to a schoolwide marketing campaign intended to boost enthusiasm. That included emails to parents and positive messages on the morning announcements.

"We set up a culture of saying yes to the test, and not even bringing up the option of opting out," she said. "Just, this is the way it is, and that's what we do."

Zenelovic, though, said the school made him jump through hoops to have his daughter sit out, and told him she'd have to take an alternate locally designed test instead.

First, he said, his daughter's classroom teacher told him repeatedly he needed to meet with the principal to opt his daughter out, rather than emailing or calling. Otherwise, he was told, she'd receive a 1 (the lowest possible score). It wasn't until later in the day, when he'd already cleared time in his work schedule, that the principal said he didn't need to come in.

Zenelovic further said that both the teacher and Matthew told him his daughter would have to take another test during the three days, and that it would count toward her grades that marking period. The state tests, by contrast, have no bearing on a student's report card.

According to Zenelovic, it was only after he objected that his daughter was then allowed an alternate activity during the testing time.

Matthew said Zenelovic misunderstood the conversation. According to Matthew, she and the teacher were telling Zenelovic that seventh- and eighthgraders who refused the tests would instead sit for a test associated with the school's International Baccalaureate program — a test they'd need to take the following week anyway.

As it turned out, Matthew said, no seventh- or eighth-graders opted out, so it wasn't an issue.

"That doesn't make any sense," Zenelovic said. "Why on Earth would I be talking about seventh- and eighth-graders when my concern is my daughter in fifth grade?"

Some New York schools have gone to great lengths to persuade parents not to refuse the tests on their children's behalf. Online opt-out forums are full of complaints about alleged coercion: sending letters home, enacting complicated opt-out procedures or making children "sit and stare" during the testing period, rather than letting them read or do another activity.

While teachers and schools are mostly held harmless from the test results, large urban districts like Rochester still have incentives to keep their participation numbers up. For one thing, the building-level test scores can still be used to determine whether a school has made enough progress to shed its designation as a receivership, priority or focus school.

In 2015, the district faced a grievance from the Rochester Teachers Association after the chief of elementary schools, Beverly Burrell-Moore, asked building principals to identify teachers who encouraged families to opt out so she could "follow up" with them.

RCSD had 14 percent of its students opt out of the 2016 ELA tests, the lowest rate in Monroe County (though higher than some other large cities). Wilson Foundation Academy, though, had the second-highest rate, at 44 percent.

Of the Wilson Foundation students who opted out of the ELA test last year, 79 were seventh-graders and 74 were eighth-graders. The latter have moved on to high school, but many of the former are presumably still at the school.

Raif Zenelovic called the dramatic change in opt-outs, from 155 to one, "exceptionally odd."

"It was frustrating talking to them," he said. "I guarantee that's why (more) people didn't bother opting their kids out."

Across Monroe County, about 30 percent of students did not take the ELA test last week. That is down a few points from each of the last two years. The math tests are the first week of May.

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