

ENGLISH, MATH TESTS

NY RELEASES STUDENT SCORES

Education chief downplays opt-out effect; one in five refused to take tests

JUSTIN MURPHY @CITIZENMURPHY The New York state Education Department downplayed the effect of the opt-out movement on Wednesday when it released the results of the statewide English and math tests given to students in grades 3-8 in the spring.

About one in five of the 1.1 million eligible students across the state refused to take the tests. Those students were more likely to be white and affluent and had done relatively poorly on the tests in 2014.

Statewide numbers remained mostly steady, with about a third of New York students judged proficient in math and ELA.

Proficiency rates were up in every district in Monroe County except Rochester, which is down slightly to about 5 percent in both math and ELA.

See TESTS, Page 8A



20%
of students opted out of April's Common Core tests in New York

Article Continued Below

[See TESTS on Page A08](#)

Tests

Continued from Page 1A

Rochester again had the worst results of any major upstate city, well below the rates in Buffalo, Syracuse and Yonkers. New York City outpaced the other so-called "Big 5" districts, the state data showed.

The numbers were knocked off kilter, however, by the swell of students and parents who opted out of the testing process as a protest against the current system of teacher and school evaluations. Official state data showed more than a third of Monroe County students opted out of at least one of the tests.

The fact that students who did poorly in 2014 were more likely to opt out could partly explain the increases in the average 2015 test scores. Rochester Superintendent Bolgen Vargas also pointed out that the concentration of opt-outs at the district's best-performing schools, like World of Inquiry School 58 and School 23, hurt its overall numbers.

The most highly anticipated question was how the state would deal with that statistical curveball. The answer: by concentrating instead on the students who did take the tests.

In a conference call, state Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia said the data are still worthwhile despite the low participation rates.

"There's no question that when you have approximately 20 percent of students not test, the results will have variation based on that," she said. "However, we did have 900,000 students test. What we have to do is move forward on this and know that 900,000 students, their families, their teachers, their schools and school districts will have data to make decisions."

An unknown number of students sat for part of the three-day test but not the entire thing. Their incomplete scores are included in the state numbers, but Elia said it's a small enough proportion not to make an important difference. East Rochester saw its math proficiency rate go up from 41 percent to 59 percent. The number of test-takers, however, was more than halved, from 447 to 208. "It's really difficult to compare from year to year when we have that number of students opt out," said East Rochester Superintendent Mark Linton. "I guess I'd question how valuable it is in general (even) if everyone took it. ... It's one piece of information we use."

The district will instead examine each individual student's test score more closely in an attempt to glean significance, he said. Bernard Brooks, a mathematician at Rochester Institute of Technology, said a small sample size is viable as long as the remaining pool of students is random and representative of the whole group. The New York State United Teachers union has bashed the tests, particularly the results being tied to teacher evaluations.

"It would be a huge mistake to read anything into these test results. Whether they're up or down, they tell us virtually nothing meaningful about students or their teachers," NYSUT President Karen Magee said in a statement.

The results go to the heart of the bitter battle at the state Capitol over testing and teacher evaluations. The state is on its third set of teacher evaluations in five years amid pushback from schools, teachers and parents, and the state added funding to help the Education Department to reduce field testing and release more details about the exams.

"One key to addressing the occurrence of 'optouts' will be to develop tests that educators and parents see as producing real value toward advancing learning by their students," Robert Lowry, deputy director of the state Council of School Superintendents, said in a statement.

State regulations prohibit judging teachers on their students' test scores if fewer than half of them participated. The district then needs to come up with an alternate assessment plan, to be agreed upon locally then submitted to the state for approval in the fall.

In Monroe County, more than 15,000 students refused one test or the other, making up more than one third of all students. Spencerport, Fairport and East Rochester all had more than half their students refuse the math test.

For instance, in Fairport, 823 students took the 2015 math tests compared with 2,472 in 2014.

The state released score information for cohorts of as few as five students. For example, at Rochester's World of Inquiry School 58, only five third-graders took the math test. Two of them got a score of 1 and three got a 2.

Before testing season, the state relayed a warning from the U.S. Education Department that schools with less than 95 percent participation could face penalties, including lost funding. Elia said she has been speaking with federal officials as they weigh their options but hedged on whether districts might in fact be penalized.

For the first three years under more stringent standards, statewide assessments were developed by the British company Pearson. The state recently ended its contract with Pearson in favor of one with a different company, Questar.

JMURPHY7@DemocratandChronicle.com

Includes reporting by Gannett Albany Bureau Chief Joseph Spector.

Powered by [TECNAVIA](#)

Copyright © 2015 Democrat and Chronicle 08/13/2015