

Testing opt-out rate down in city schools

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Fewer students in the Rochester City School District opted out of state math and English tests this spring, following a countywide trend of a slightly less vigorous protest than last year.

Across the district, 15.7 percent of students in grades 3-8 did not sit for the math exams and 13.7 percent did not sit for the English exams. Those numbers last year were 18 and 16 percent, respectively.

Similarly to last year, the opt-out rates varied widely among schools. World of Inquiry School 58 once again had the highest refusal rate in the county and perhaps the state: 80 percent of its students did not take the math test.

Virgil Grissom School 7 was a surprise runnerup at 50 percent for math; Wilson Foundation Academy (46 percent) and James Duffy School 12 (31 percent) also had high rates. By contrast, 10 schools had an opt-out rate lower than 5 percent and 22 schools were lower than 10 percent.

The rates were much higher for older students. A quarter of eighth-graders opted out of the math test compared to 9 percent of third-graders.

The decline from last year happened despite a more prominent opt-out advocacy effort by some city parents. The Monroe County Federation of Teachers, including the Rochester Teachers Association, also urged parents to have their children refuse the tests.

“It’s a little disappointing,” said Eileen Graham, a city parent and founder of the Black Student Leadership Movement who was a leading opt-out organizer. “I think we just have to push forward and inform people earlier so they can make well-informed decisions, especially when it comes to the black community.”

All suburban districts already announced their numbers. The final rates for the entire county, plus Victor, are 29.3 percent for math and 26.9 percent for English, down from 32.5 percent and 31.8 percent in 2015, respectively.

“It’s good news that the entire Rochester region joined so much of the state in lower opt-out rates,” said Stephen Sigmund, executive director of the pro-test group High Achievement New York. “With more parents saying ‘Yes to the Test,’ it’s time for opponents to join supporters in working to improve assessments, rather than trying to end them, so every child has an equal shot at a quality education.” The city school district has a different set of incentives and consequences in weighing its approach to standardized testing. While the state announced test results will not be used to evaluate students or teachers, they apparently will still be considered for the purpose of removing schools from receivership. The federal government in December warned it could withhold state aid from districts with too-high test refusal rates. It said the same thing before the 2015 tests but ultimately took no action. The 2015 opt-out movement led in part to an array of statewide policy changes as well as the selection of opt-out advocate Betty Rosa as the Regents chancellor.

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