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ANALYZING STUDENT OPT-OUT OF STANDARDIZED TESTING IN MAINE

by

Maude Meeker

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors

Elementary Education

The Honors College

University of Maine

May 2016

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## **Abstract**

Under current educational policy in the United States, standardized assessment is (and has been) a required element of K-12 education in order for schools to receive federal funding, most often through Title I programs. However, in 2015, many families began opting their students out of these standardized tests in several states, including Maine. This study aims to identify any possible trends associated with opting out, such as socioeconomic status or student achievement levels, and also determine the potential impact of certain subgroups of students opting out of standardized tests, such as misrepresentation of a school's results because of skewed test scores. Through surveying superintendents of schools with less than 50% of their students participating in the test, this study found that there are several potential factors that could affect opting out, the most common of which is the influence of socioeconomic status.

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to all the teachers (both in and outside of the classroom) who inspired my love of education, pushed me to reach higher than I thought I could before, and have continuously supported me in attaining my goals; I hope to someday have even a fraction of the same positive impact on a future student as you did on me. Also, to my parents; thank you for being my very first teachers and for instilling the values of hard work and dedication in me.

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## **Introduction:**

Over the past couple of decades, standardized testing has become the norm in many states as a measure of student achievement (Popham, 2014). Many states require passing some version of standardized tests as a prerequisite for graduation. However, many of these same states allow parents to opt their children out of standardized testing under certain circumstances, such as low English Proficiency, late enrollment/early withdrawal, or special considerations (New England Common Assessment Program NECAP, 2012). This provision of allowing some students to opt out of testing may affect school and district level scores. As a consequence, some schools or districts may report lower or higher achievement scores than an accurate representation of their school.

In Spring 2015, Maine required 3rd through 8th, and 11th grade students to take a new version of the Maine Educational Assessment (MEA) developed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC). As is the case with many states, Maine parents have the right to opt their child out of the test, but there is no specific policy regarding opting out, just the federal and state requirements for how many students have to take the test. However, this knowledge is not made publicly available; there is no specific policy regarding whether schools have to inform parents of their right to opt their child out of taking the test. L.D. 695, sponsored by Representative Sara Gideon of Freeport, proposed that school districts would have to create content on their websites or other forms of communication that explicitly told parents of their right to opt their children out of these tests, and that teachers would be allowed to communicate the right to opt out to parents as well (Russell, 2014). While the Maine State Senate approved this legislation in June 2015, Governor Paul LePage vetoed it. One district, Lewiston,

publicly made the decision to inform the parents in the district, but for the majority of the state of Maine, families were on their own to discover their right to opt out (Curtis 2015). Despite this, Maine still saw an increasing number of its students (particularly high school juniors) opting out of the MEA. On May 11th, the *Bangor Daily News* reported that, “Schools in pockets across Maine have reported students opting out of the tests at high rates.” (McCrea, 2015). Several movements and organizations also supported opt out, which will be discussed further later in this paper.

Under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) standards that were in place when this project began, schools were required to have a 95% participation rate in the standardized assessment or risk losing federal funds for Title 1, 2, or 6 programs (McCrea, 2015). Therefore, this opt-out movement contains policy implications, such as how much government funding a school receives. However, besides the fact that opt out was occurring (and at high rates), there was little to no information available on which students were opting out. If certain subgroups of students were opting out, then scores from these tests could be misleading. This study could help determine whether the scores produced by this test are reliable and a good measure of the student population at the school.

In this study, I am interested in determining who elects to opt out of testing requirements. For example, can opting out be predicted by socioeconomic status (SES)? That is, are students from higher SES homes more likely to opt out of the tests? Can opting out be predicted by achievement? That is, are higher achieving students opting out of the tests? Or is the opposite true, with low achieving students? What are the impacts of these possible decisions? If, for example, it is discovered that high achieving students are opting out, then the schools’ scores would be much lower than the student population at



their school actually represents. Under NCLB, government funding is often tied to test scores, or evidence of improvement. If schools are seeing disproportionately low scores, it could affect their financial funding. Or, if the low achieving students are opting out, then the school could see disproportionately high scores. If teachers are using this information, they might be misled to believe that their students are all at a proficient level, and miss critical areas of student need/deficiency.

Although Maine has discontinued using the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium developed test, the policy of allowing parents to opt their children out of high stakes tests still remains. The name of the test may have changed, but the policies of standardized assessment are still prevalent in our country. The information this study is aiming to find could serve as useful knowledge on standardized testing in general, a current issue of much debate in the U.S.

## **Literature Review**

In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was signed into law by President Johnson. Its original, intended purpose was to ensure equality for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds by supplying schools in those areas with federal funding. In 1994, ESEA was reauthorized as the Improving America's Schools Act, and more accountability elements were added for districts that receive federal money. In 2002, another major reauthorization occurred: No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which was signed into law by President Bush. NCLB was the seventh reauthorization of the original 1965 ESEA. (McCann, *No Child Left Behind*).

Under NCLB, accountability for schools increased even more. For example,

“NCLB requires states to test students in reading and mathematics annually in grades 3-8 and once in grades 10-12. States must test students in science once in grades 3-5, 6-8, and 10-12. Individual schools, school districts and states must publicly report test results in the aggregate and for specific student subgroups, including low-income students, students with disabilities, English language learners, and major racial and ethnic groups.” (McCann, *No Child Left Behind*).

These testing requirements were to attempt to ensure that all students had equal opportunity to succeed through their education. NCLB also implemented a 100% proficiency rate goal (to be reached by 2014) in grade-level mathematics and reading. States were required to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) towards this goal each year. However, in 2011, under the Obama administration, the government decided to allow states to apply for waivers to these requirements (including reaching 100% proficiency by 2014, interventions, and others), as is discussed later in this paper. (McCann, *No Child Left Behind*).

No Child Left Behind continued as the governing education act under the Obama administration. However, in 2009, President Obama also implemented the Race to the Top initiative, which offered states a chance to compete for federal funds if they adopted

the reformative requirements that the program encouraged. These include: “Designing and implementing rigorous standards and high-quality assessments, attracting and keeping great teachers and leaders in America’s classrooms, supporting data systems that inform decisions and improve instruction, using innovation and effective approaches to turn-around struggling schools, and demonstrating and sustaining education reform.” (United States of America, 2009).

One of the impacts of this program was a fairly widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards by many states. In 2012, the Center for American Progress reported out on preliminary results of the Race to the Top Program. Senior Fellow Ulrich Boser, who wrote “Race to the Top: What Have We Learned So Far?” shared some of his findings: “Although he cautioned that the report is neither summative nor exhaustive, Boser said that ‘Race to the Top has advanced the reform agenda ... [and] has done a lot to move forward’ the application of Common Core State Standards, a set of new and more rigorous academic standards that are internationally benchmarked.” (Center for American Progress, 2012). Maine adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2011, with full implementation in the 2013-2014 academic year, and 42 other states (as of 2015) use the CCSS as their benchmark standards in Mathematics and English Language Arts as well. (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2016). These standards were adopted into the Maine Learning Results, which is what Maine’s state assessments are aligned to.

Although NCLB was supposed to be reauthorized in 2007, it was not until the end of 2015 that the government issued a reauthorization for it. In December of 2015, President Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the newest reauthorization of the ESEA. Under ESSA, measures such as setting goals, measuring

progress, enforcing accountability, and assessing all are still in place. However, the decisions made around those topics are now in the hands of the state government as opposed to the federal government (as in NCLB). For example, schools now will be measured by academic achievement, another academic indicator, English proficiency, and one other factor that the state selects. States can also choose the criteria that schools have to meet in order to exit status as a Comprehensive Support and Improvement School, a Targeted Support and Intervention School, or a Additional Targeted Support School. (Ed Trust, 2016).

While power was shifted back to the states on many aspects, standardized assessment is still required under ESSA. “The Maine DOE is required by *Maine Statutes 20-A, Section 6209*, and by the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act *Section 1111(b)(3)* to assess all students in grades 3-8 and at one point in high school in the content areas of mathematics and English language arts (ELA)/literacy.” (Maine Department of Education, 2015, *2015-2016 Frequently Asked Questions*). Testing under ESSA is investigated further in the Discussion section of this thesis.

The high opt out rates that Maine saw in spring of 2015 meant that it did not fulfill its policy over testing 95% of students. Because of this, the United States Department of Education reached out to Maine in order to request a plan for increasing participation in state standardized assessment in order to continue receiving Title I funds. In a letter to William Beardsley, Maine’s Acting Commissioner of Education, Dr. Monique Chism, US Department of Education’s Director of the Office of State Support, wrote,

“Section 1111(b)(3) of the ESEA requires each State educational agency (SEA) that receives funds under Title I, Part A of the ESEA to implement in each local educational agency (LEA) in the State a set of high-quality academic

assessments...These requirements do not allow students to be excluded from Statewide assessments. Rather, they set out the rule that *all* students in the tested grades must be assessed. To the extent that the statute permits flexibility, an LEA or school may be designated as making adequate yearly progress if it assesses at least 95 percent of its students.” (Chism, 2015).

Maine responded with a letter detailing the potential explanation they had for the high opt out numbers, and also the plans they had to increase student participation in assessments. Their reasons for the opt out included withdrawal from the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium while testing was occurring still, the SAT not being offered as the standardized assessment for juniors as it had been previously and parents misunderstanding that students had to take the SBAC MEA instead of the SAT, and very low high school participation rates due to the SAT confusion. William Beardsley wrote, “A perceived cascade of testing created a new anti-testing population comprised of high achieving students and parents who found testing did nothing to enrich or increase their academic experience and college application process.” (Beardsley, 2015). This study aims to dig deeper into the reasons for opting out, and attempt to determine if there are trends present within student opt out, as Beardsley believed there were. For example, are the high achieving students opting out? And if so, are there explanations for this trend? Could SES be another factor to predict opt out, as SES can often be tied to achievement? These questions are further explored in the subsequent sections of this paper.

For the next year (2016), Maine’s steps to increase participation in testing included requiring additional documentation (such as how they communicated the importance of taking the test and/or their plans to improve participation) from districts who did not meet their agreement with the state to have 95% of their students participate in the test, returning to administering the SAT as the state assessment for juniors in high

school, identifying districts with low participation rates, and communicating the importance of taking the tests and also the negative ramifications that accompany opting out with the public. (Beardsley, 2015). These terms were accepted by the US Department of Education.

However, as far as opting out goes, Maine does not have/publicize policy on opting out; just on taking the test. In the document entitled “The Legalities Surrounding ‘Opting-Out’ of Standardized Tests in Maine,” the department does not mention any allowance of opting out. Instead, they list the laws (both state and federal) that enforce 95% participation rates. In May, 2015, Maine DOE Acting Commissioner Tom Desjardin sent a notice to schools that included the following message over the state’s stance on student opt-out:

“Both attorneys [from the Office of the Maine Attorney General and the legislature’s Office of Policy and Legal Analysis] advised the committee [Education and Cultural Affairs] that parents and students have a right to not take the standardized statewide assessment. No one is going to force a child to sit and take the test. They **do not**, however, have a right to be shielded from the consequences of that act which could range from action by the school district or loss of federal funding for the school. Local school districts in Maine have the authority under state law to place requirements on students and not award a diploma if the student does not meet these requirements. This could include things such as community service, a senior year graduation exam, or participation in statewide or local assessments.” (Desjardin, 2015).

Essentially, although the state cannot prohibit a parent from opting their child out, they are requiring that students take the test, and any implications for opting out of standardized testing will be administered if they exist in the school that the student attends (such as not receiving a diploma).

Will this be enough to encourage parents to keep their child in standardized testing, or does the opt out movement go beyond just not wanting to take an additional

test? Zan Crowder and Stephanie Konle see a different rationale for the opt out movement. In their article “Gumbo Ya-Ya, or What Pearson Can’t Hear: Opt-Out, Standardized Testing, and Student Surveillance” in *The High School Journal*, they describe the potential downfalls of not questioning companies like Pearson and Educational Testing Service [ETS], and allowing them much free rein when it comes to testing, referencing Pearson’s lack of transparency and the power it has (shown through a New Jersey example in which it was discovered that Pearson was monitoring student social media in order to prevent information sharing).

“We contend that standardized tests do not serve underprivileged students well because they instantiate deficit models, narrow curriculum, devour enormous amounts of otherwise useful class time, as well as deprofessionalize and denigrate teachers who are often among the most positive role models that many students encounter. Further, compliance allows companies like Pearson and ETS to determine the definitions of progress, aptitude and knowledge without requiring them to be transparent as to their methods and assumptions.” (Crowder, 2015).

The authors also bring up the point that standardized assessments will not solve poverty in the U.S.

In their article “High-stakes Testing Hasn’t Brought Education Gains,” Judith Browne Dianis, John H. Jackson, and Pedro Noguera take a similar stance on standardized assessment. The authors write that, “Data from these annual assessments are not a reasonable proxy for educational opportunity and equity. African-American and Latino students are more likely to be suspended, expelled, or pushed out of school regardless of their performance on state tests, and, despite some improvement in graduation rates, significant disparities remain.” (2015, p. 35). Even before NCLB, ESEA was established as an antipoverty effort. NCLB’s original goal was to identify which students were being failed by America’s educational system, and then improve the

schools they were in (or allow them the option to attend a better school), which was also an attempt to close the achievement gap between subgroups of students.

These authors, however, argue that the standardized assessment portion of NCLB is not actually fulfilling its purpose as part of a plan to work towards reducing the achievement gap (which would, theoretically, in the long run work towards reducing poverty). Instead, it is subjugating students to potential loss of learning material due to the phenomenon of teaching to the test, and simply producing predictable results. They note that, “We now know students cannot be tested out of poverty. NCLB did take us a step forward by requiring schools to produce evidence that students were learning, but it took us several steps backward when that evidence was reduced to how well a student performed on a standardized test.” (p. 37). The authors view opting out of standardized assessments as taking a stand against requirements for students that they feel are not proving useful.

They provide another point on the usefulness of these test scores as well:

“We are not opposed to assessment. Standards and assessments are important for diagnostic purposes. However, too often, the data produced by standardized tests are not made available to teachers until after the school year, making it impossible to use the information to address student needs. When tests are used in this way, they do little more than measure predictable inequities in academic outcomes.” (p. 37).”

In order for assessment to be useful, it should be able to be used to modify instruction as needed based on results. With our current standardized assessment schedule, Maine assesses students in the spring, and teachers often do not receive data until after their students have left their class. Therefore, the primary purpose of standardized assessments seems to be to serve as a measurement of school achievement, not to give individualized data on student performance.



If standardized assessments are serving primarily as school evaluation systems, then the issue of opting out and skewing test scores could potentially be a serious issue, and not just for Maine. Principal ACT research associate Michelle Croft wrote in a 2015 Issue Brief over the topic that,

“In the 2014–2015 school year, groups of parents throughout the United States opted their students out of testing. In New York State, 20 percent of students opted out of statewide testing this year, and in Washington State, more than one-fourth of high school juniors refused to participate — which caused participation rates to fall far below the federally required 95 percent. Additionally, significant numbers of parents in Colorado, Florida, Oregon, Maine, Michigan, New Jersey, and New Mexico opted their students out of statewide testing this past year.” (Croft, p.1).

However, only California, Colorado, and Oregon will allow students to opt out with no consequences; Maine, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Nebraska, and Washington allow students to opt out (refuse to take the test) but do not guarantee safety from consequences of doing so. (p. 3). In Maine, these consequences could include not receiving a diploma (depending on the school district). Despite the high opt out rate, in 2015, no Maine students were penalized for opting out. “The Maine DOE has said it won’t take any action against districts that don’t meet the 95 percent federal threshold, in part because this was the first — and last — year of the Smarter Balanced statewide assessment.” (McCrea, 2015). This enforcement could also be difficult for districts to uphold in the future, as parents do have a say in what their child does and/or doesn’t participate in.

Croft also explains why standardized tests are important: they give information on student performance compared to state academic standards, the quality of the school, and also on research and program evaluation. (p. 2). All of these measures are important, but could become invalid if certain populations are opting-out of the assessments used to

create the measurements. This study aims to investigate whether or not this is occurring in the state of Maine, and if so, what the implications are.

There are two sides to the opt-out movement that have been explored in this literature review. One side believes that standardized assessment is not accomplishing what it was intended to, and we need to come up with another way to attempt to ensure that all students receive a quality education. On the other hand, standardized assessments can provide us with useful data if the entire student population participates in them. However, the true determining factor in this debate is the educational policy that governs standardized assessments, and currently, our policy is to administer these tests.

### **Study Description**

As discussed in the literature review above, although the opt out movement has seen increasing momentum in our country, the largest factor relating to standardized assessment and opt out is educational policy, which ties standardized assessment scores and participation rates to federal funding for education. Because of this, I am interested in how opting out could affect a school under No Child Left Behind, the governing

policy that was in place when Spring 2015 testing was occurring. Are there specific groups of students opting out of these assessments, such as high SES students or high achieving students? And, if so, are these specific subgroups opting out affecting schools' scores from the assessment?

To investigate the answers to these questions, I designed this study with the help of my thesis advisor and committee members. By surveying superintendents, and other administrators if needed, I hope to determine if there are any trends present pertaining to who is opting out of these assessments, and what that could mean for the school's scores and, potentially, funding. The survey administered included questions on the percentage of students who opted out (chose not to take the test), the demographics of those students (high-/low-achieving, and Free/Reduced Lunch rates), and also the district's policy on/process for opting-out. The following sections detail the methods, results, and possible implications of the data collected from this study.

### **Participants**

In this project, 19 high schools in Maine that had less than 50% of their third year high school students participate in the SBAC test were identified, based on released test participation and score results from the Maine Department of Education. Schools were also identified based on the need of representation from a range of from different socioeconomic areas for the survey. Brief demographic information on each of the

districts of the 19 schools in this study can be found in Table 1 on p. 15. The superintendents of these 19 schools were contacted, and out of these 19, 7 agreed to take part in the survey for a 37% participation rate.

Participants in this study consisted of superintendents of the above identified districts in Maine. Superintendents were contacted, by phone, by the principal investigator. If the superintendent was unavailable or unreachable by phone, a voicemail was left or an email was sent. If the superintendent referred the principal investigator to a principal or curriculum coordinator who would be a better source of information, they were contacted by phone or email instead. They were informed of the purpose of the study (to discover any possible correlations or predictors of opting out, such as SES status, or achievement level) and the potential benefits. These included determining whether this test is producing an accurate representation of the school, and whether it provides useful data for teachers, administrators, and policy makers. If there is a group of students opting out (such as high vs. low achieving, or SES status), then the schools could be either under- or over-reporting their achievement.

**Table 1** Population of District and Free/Reduced Lunch Rate

Table 1 shows the entire district population of the schools surveyed, and also the Free/Reduced Lunch (FRL) rate for either school surveyed in order to give appropriate background knowledge on the participants in this study. Populations range from 3,767 to 95, and FRL ranges from 66.1% to 5.5%.

<i>School</i>	<i>District Population</i>	<i>FRL</i>
A	2,027	9.2%
B	95	32.6%

C	5,281	66.1%
D	316	39.8%
E	2,146	5.5%
F	682	54.8%
G	3,767	38.1%

*Note:* District Population numbers based off of 2014-2015 data. All data sourced from Maine Department of Education Data Warehouse.

## Methods

### *Procedures*

All superintendents were contacted by phone and asked to participate. The seven that agreed to participate were asked questions on students from high schools in their district being studied who opted out of the *Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium* created test. Questions focused on the demographics of students who opted out of testing, such as, number on free/reduced lunch and number of high achieving students. All data collected was de-identified, and no information was linked to individual students or superintendents.

Superintendents were then asked if they wished to participate in the survey. If they did, they were asked the following questions about their interpretations of public data on these tests:

- How many/what percent of students *chose to not take the test* or “opted out” as opposed to missing the test due to absence, illness, etc.?
- How many/what percent of those students were on free/reduced lunch?
- How many/what percent of those students were high achieving students? How many/what percent of those students were low achieving students?
- What was your opt-out procedure? Did you publicize the knowledge of opting out and/or the procedure for doing that?

Information from the interviews was written down by the principal investigator. Handwritten notes were taken while the interview was occurring. In one case, the superintendent opted to answer the questions via email, and therefore the data recorded was verbatim. This will be noted when the interview is discussed later. If superintendents provided additional information, such as their views on why students would have opted-

out, that was also recorded. Superintendents were then thanked for their participation and asked if they would like to receive results from the data once the project was completed. This information was then organized and analyzed at the end of the data collection period.

## **Results**

For the purpose of confidentiality, the names of schools studied or superintendents interviewed will be withheld, and instead will be referred to as School A, School B, School C, School D, School E, School F, and School G. All of the data recorded below is either from the Maine Department of Education's Data Warehouse (the Free/Reduced Lunch percentages for the entire school), or based off of notes that the principal investigator took by hand while the interviews occurred, except for one interview that was conducted by email, which is therefore verbatim and will be noted as such when it appears in this thesis. A table with all the numerical data collected follows this section (Table 2, p. 27). The full interview notes can be found in Appendix A.

*School A:*

School A had the highest opt out rate of the schools studied, with 78% of the students not taking the test. Out of 167 students that were intended to participate in the test, only 37 took the test. However, the administrator interviewed did not differentiate between opt out, and students not participating. Therefore, it is possible that some of the students in this number missed the test due to illness, absence, or other such factors, but unlikely as students who miss a test for the previously listed reasons would most likely be given a make-up date.

School A also had a very low percentage of its students that qualified for Free/Reduced Lunch; the reported percentage from the Maine DOE Data Warehouse was 9.20%. The administrator interviewed from School A reported the number as slightly higher (around 10%), and also noted that the Free/Reduced Lunch percentage is not always an accurate representation of socioeconomic status due to social stigmas



surrounding it, and students (especially those in high school) not turning the forms in due to these societal pressures.

The administrator at School A also noted that the school saw a lower proficiency rate than they had before from the SATs from the students that did take the test. On the SATs, the school saw proficiency rates between 70-80%, while on this test they had a 67% proficiency rate. The administrator did not attribute this to a skewed participation rate (such as only having high achieving students participate); but instead to the newness of the test, and junior students (both high and low achieving) already having enough to worry about in the realm of academics, and therefore not prioritizing this test.

The high opt-out rate combined with the low free-reduced lunch rate seen in this school's data suggests a potential relationship between higher socioeconomic parents being more engaged in what's happening at their child's school, and in the field of education and testing, and therefore being more aware of opt out.

*School B:*

At school B, the administrator reported, "70% of students opted out from taking the test with parental support." Out of these students, about 30% of them qualified for Free/Reduced Lunch (the average for the high school is 32.6%). The administrator interviewed noted that participation in the test was split about 50/50 between high and low achieving students.

School B did choose to inform parents about the process of opting out and how to do so. The administrator interviewed discussed how the issue was originally brought up as an agenda item at a meeting in November, and then an open-session school board meeting was additionally held in December over the topic. At this meeting, community

members were invited to share their thoughts on the test and opt out, and what they wanted to see happen in their district. After getting this input, a letter was created detailing what opt out meant and the process of opting out, and sent to parents of students who were intended to participate in the test.

School B also exemplifies a data trend that could suggest higher socioeconomic status parents are more likely to opt their children out, with a high opt out rate and a fairly low free/reduced lunch average. If this trend is present, and a certain population of students is opting out, it could possibly mean skewed scores for a school.

*School C:*

According to the superintendent interviewed, “Approximately 60%” of the students at School C opted out from taking the assessment. Although the superintendent interviewed did not have the data on how many of the opt-out students qualified to receive Free/Reduced Lunch, he did note that he believed around 55% of the high school qualified (Maine DOE Data Warehouse percentage was 66.10%). Parents in the district were informed about the test: a letter was sent home encouraging students to participate in the test, and there was an opt out form available as well. As for high vs. low achieving students opting out, he discussed that, “Based on rough calculations and average grades, on average, higher performing students were opting out.”

This school presents a different way of looking at opt out trends, since it still had high opt out, but is in a lower socioeconomic area. However, if it is the higher performing students opting out, as the superintendent noted, that could still suggest a link between informed/involved parents and opting out. From a broad perspective, it’s possible that the higher performing students have parents who are more engaged in their

education. Also, if the higher performing students are opting out, then the school could have inaccurately low proficiency rates if more lower performing students are taking the test than higher performing students.

The superintendent interviewed also suggested another way to interpret the high level of opt out that this school saw. He described how the district tested towards the end of the testing window, when there had been ample media coverage of issues surrounding the test, including the opt out movement. Besides those students who had formally opted out using the school's procedure, there were many students at School C that simply didn't show up on test day. The superintendent attributed this to a "bandwagon" effect, and noted that their opt out procedure, while useful in the beginning, "essentially broke down after this event."

This district also shows a possible new way to interpret opt out: that there were potential sociological factors that came into play when opting out. The media gave a lot of coverage to the opt out movement across Maine, and this could have been a factor in how parents were informed, or made the decision in opting their child out of the assessment.

*School D:*

The interview for this school took place over email, and therefore the data is verbatim from the administrator interviewed, instead of from summarized notes taken by the principal investigator. At this school, 55% of students opted out of the test. 52% of those students that opted out qualified for free/reduced lunch.

In this interview, quantifications for the terms "high-achieving" and "low-achieving" were also given upon request from the administrator. High-achieving was said

to be students in the average A-B range, while low-achieving was said to be students in the average D range. Based on these terms, the administrator replied that about 37% of students who opted out were high-achieving, “Including all four students who were named honor parts this year,” and about 37% were low-achieving.

As for publicizing opt out, the administrator wrote, “We did not publicize the option, but there was plenty of media coverage state-wide. We tested later in the window, so our parents were aware from media coverage. Parents were required to request opting out in writing. We required parents to meet with me, understand that opting out could have negative ramifications for the student and school, and if the parents still wanted to pull their child out, they could.”

Just like School C, School D also saw the media as a potential factor in their opt out rate. Media was the primary source of parents’ information about opting out at School D, since they chose not to inform, and they still saw over half of their students’ opt out. The factor of testing late in the window, when the opt out movement and media coverage of that movement were widespread, also might effect opt out rates.

*School E:*

School E saw a somewhat lower opt out rate, with, “A little over half, about 35-40%” of their students intended to take the test opting out. The superintendent interviewed did note that, “This rate was high compared to other schools in the surrounding area.” As to Free/Reduced lunch, the superintendent interviewed did not feel as though socioeconomic status was a factor in opt out. The DOE reported FRL rate for School E is 5.50% (one of the lowest rates in the study). The superintendent also

reported that a mixture of high-/low-achieving students opted out, and that there was, to the best of his knowledge, a balance between the two that opted out.

A factor that this superintendent referred to in School E's interview was the timing of the test, and specifically the impacts that the timing had on juniors in high school. Maine previously used the SAT as its' spring assessment for juniors in high school, a test that many juniors already were planning on taking. With the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) designed test, the juniors were still focused on the SAT (and the implications it has for getting into college), but had another assessment to take as well. The superintendent shared that some of their high-achieving juniors could be taking 4-5 AP classes, which also have important examinations in the spring. The superintendent believed that some students felt "tested out", and, "Placed more value on the other tests" they had to take instead of the new SBAC assessment.

School E, just like School D, also chose not to publicize the choice opting out. Their protocol was that students needed a letter stating that they wished to opt out, and also explaining why they wanted to opt out. This information was distributed to families within a packet of letters that contained information about the test and test prep for students.

Also like School D, School E tested towards the end of the testing window. The superintendent noted that this was a potential factor, as it was accompanied by many parents asking questions about the test and opting out and high levels of media coverage on the test. This also played into the issue of being "tested out" mentioned earlier. Both School D and School E's anecdotal data point towards the timing of the test being a potential factor in opt out.

*School F:*

School F had about  $\frac{1}{3}$  of their students (approximately 33%) opt out of taking the test. The superintendent did not provide data on their Free/Reduced lunch rate or whether it was high vs. low-achieving students taking the test. Instead, he felt as though the main factors contributing to opt out were social and peer pressures. School F also tested at the end of the testing window, and the superintendent noted that, “Neighboring districts had already administered the assessment.” From the DOE, the Free/Reduced lunch rate at School F is 54.80%.

This led to student-student peer discussions on social media about the test, and, as other superintendents and administrators noted in this study, large amounts of media coverage on the topic. The superintendent compared the high school assessment with the elementary level assessment, which was given much earlier in the testing window. At the elementary level, he reported that the district saw a much higher level of compliance with taking the test, and very low levels of opt out. He accredited the increased level of opt out seen at the high school to sociological factors, such as the media and social interactions.

He went on to detail the opt out movement as seen in School F, which was slightly different than that of other schools. The school initially saw about  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the students opt out. School F did notify parents of the right to opt out, but this right wasn’t widely utilized until close to the test date. The school, “Saw a surge a few days before the assessment, and then a smaller surge on the day of the assessment.” However, the final opt out amount was about a  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the students intended to take the assessment. The superintendent noted that, “Some students withdrew their opt out forms after finding out the school was requiring an alternate, non-state, in-house assessment for those students

who opted out of the SBAC designed assessment, and that opting out did not just mean a ‘free day.’”

Based on conversations with students, the superintendent believed that some students would have rather taken the SBAC designed assessment, because they, “Felt no obligation to perform well on it and did not see it as meaningful.” If they had taken the in-house assessment, they would have been more obligated to perform well, as they placed more value on their teachers and their school that were administering it.

School F’s data showed that there were also social factors that could have played a role in opt out. These social factors “Influenced both parents and students,” and the superintendent noted that they were complex and often individual. This idea will be further explored in the Discussion section.

*School G:*

School G, similarly to School F, also saw changes in their opt out rates. Initially, they had about 95% of their students that were taking the test. However, on the second day of testing, it was announced that Maine would be dropping the SBAC designed assessment for future testing. The school then saw about 75-80% of students participate in the assessment. The superintendent noted that the test lost value after it was discontinued for future years. As for high-/low-achieving students participating, the superintendent’s guesstimate was that was approximately split 50-50. School G’s Free/Reduced lunch rate is 38.10%, but the superintendent interviewed mentioned, as others did as well, that the social stigmas associated with qualifying for Free/Reduced lunch affect the accuracy of that number. He noted that the district average was between

50-54%, and that that might be a more accurate depiction of the socioeconomic status (SES) of the population.

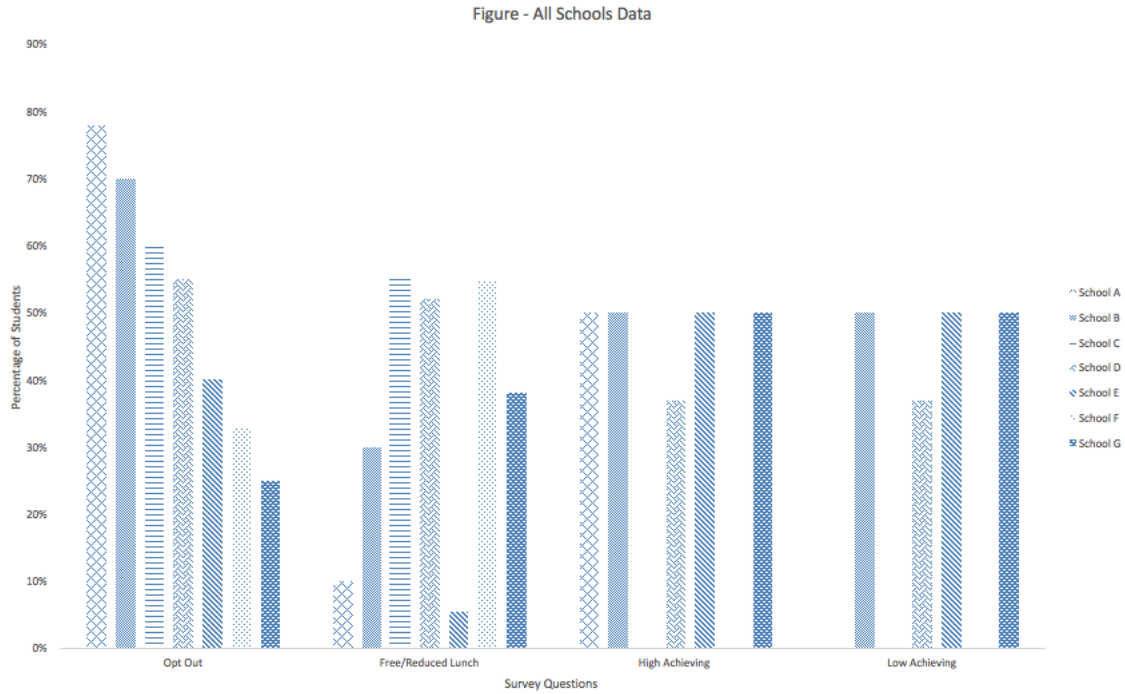
School G did receive several requests to opt out from parents, and this prompted the school to consult with the state on how to handle the situation. The state encouraged them to inform the parents about opting out, and this led to the school sending out a brochure to parents about opting out. The superintendent shared, “Parents had to provide a written statement in order to opt their child out of testing.” Several requests focused on wanting students to be able to focus on the SAT, a factor seen in other schools surveyed as well.

School G’s data, alongside School’s A, B, and C’s, also aligns with the possible effect of SES on opting out. The district has a higher Free/Reduced lunch rate, with a lower opt out rate. This suggests that a lower SES area might have parents who are not as involved/informed in their child’s education, and therefore might not have the information or motivation to opt their child out of testing.

**Table 2:** All Schools Data



Table 2 encompasses all the data over student opt-out, Free/Reduced Lunch (FRL) rates, and high-/low-achieving students that opted out from all of the schools surveyed. All data was collected either through this study or through the Maine DOE Data Warehouse. Potential trends between opt out and FRL can be seen in this comparison.



## Discussion

Based on the results from this survey, several possible explanations for the high opt-out rates seen across Maine during Spring 2015 Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) designed MEA testing can be explored. These potential explanations for opting out are also compiled by school in a table at the end of the section (Table 3, p. 33).

### *Socioeconomic Status*

One potential correlation is between socioeconomic status (SES) and opting out. This trend was seen in Schools A, B, C, G, and possibly School F as well. These schools had fairly high opt out rates, with lower SES rates (as identified by the percent of students who received Free/Reduced Lunch). The American Psychological Association notes that, “Families from low-SES communities are less likely to have the financial resources or time availability to provide children with academic support.” (2016). Families in a lower SES area may not be as aware of the options surrounding their child’s education, such as the right to opt out. They may also not be as involved in what is happening at their local schools. At almost all of the schools, parental permission was required to opt out. Therefore, if a parent didn’t have the time to read about opt out and/or the test in materials sent home or in the news, or research their options, their child may not have been opted out. This could stem from factors such as education, time, or work/other commitments. For example, if parents lack education themselves, it could be difficult for them to engage with their child’s educational experience. In their study “Parenting Practices and Children’s Academic Success in Low-SES Families” Aziza Mayo and Iram Siraj noted that, “As children, these parents had felt out of place in the world of education. As adults they felt unable to make the rules of that world work in

favour of their child.” (2015, p. 61). Low-SES is often accompanied by low levels of education; meaning that a parent could feel uncomfortable or unqualified to make decisions surrounding their child’s education.

Key points from the National Assessment of Adult Literacy include that:

“Higher percentages of adults with higher literacy levels than adults with lower literacy levels were employed full-time, and lower percentages were out of the labor force. Sixty-four percent of adults with Proficient prose literacy were employed full-time, compared with 29 percent of adults with Below Basic prose literacy. Eighteen percent of adults with Proficient prose literacy were not in the labor force, compared with 57 percent of adults with Below Basic prose literacy.” (2003, Greenberg).

In this study, the majority of the schools interviewed required some form of written parental consent to opt out (Schools C, D, E, and G all explicitly stated some form of writing was required; Schools B & F had an opt-out procedure in place, but detailed descriptions were not given. No data was given for School A on this question). If a parent did not have sufficient literacy skills, the likelihood of them writing a letter or form to opt their child out of testing is unlikely. Therefore, another potential link could be seen between low-SES parents who may struggle with literacy and consequently are unable or unwilling to write a letter to the school on their child’s behalf to opt out.

### *Academic Achievement*

Another factor that may accompany SES is academic achievement. The American Psychological Association also writes that, “Research continues to link lower SES to lower academic achievement and slower rates of academic progress as compared with higher SES communities.” (2016). If SES is a factor in opt out, and the higher SES families are opting their children out of taking the test, then it is possible that it is also

the higher achieving students are opting out. While most of the data from this survey showed that administrators interviewed felt as though opt out between high- and low-achieving students was split 50-50 (Schools B, E, G, and A), the administrator interviewed at School C mentioned that on average, it was the higher achieving students opting out of the test. If there is a correlation between these factors, and the high-achieving students are opting out, it could skew the school's results and they could appear lower than they actually should be.

### *Media*

Many administrators interviewed also mentioned that the high media coverage on opt out influenced the rate of opt out seen. Schools C, D, E, and F all directly stated media as a possible cause of opt out. The test was not always portrayed positively in the media, especially after glitches in the computerized tests were encountered and brought to light. Several organizations also encouraged parents to opt out online, such as Fair Test, No Common Core Maine, and United Opt Out, among others. The Maine Educational Association issued statements supporting parents' right to opt their child out, and also opposing the test:

“The Smarter Balanced Assessment, also known as Maine Educational Assessment (MEA) for Mathematics and English Language Arts/Literacy, which is intended to align with CCSS, has been adopted as a Maine high-stakes student assessment. MEA has several concerns with Smarter Balanced Assessments. MEA believes the current overuse and misuse of high stakes standardized testing is detrimental to our students and public education.” (Maine Educational Association, 2015).

While the influence of the media may not necessarily signify a certain population of students opting out, it still could have played a role in how parents found out about opt out, and/or could have influenced their views and attitudes about the test. If a parent

heard a media report that mentioned negative aspects of the test, they may be more likely to opt their child out.

### *Timeframe of Test*

The media's influence was also related to the timeframe in which the school administered the test. There was a window in which schools could choose when they wanted to give the test. Some administrators surveyed reported that because they tested at the end of the given window, the opt out "movement", that was gaining momentum as more students took the test and was emphasized by the high media coverage, was a potential factor influencing opt out. Schools D, E, F, and G all mentioned timeframe as being a possible opt out factor.

While the exponential growth of the opt out movement played a role in the impact of timeframe on opting out, there was also another factor that dealt with the timing of the test. Several administrators also mentioned that their students were "tested out." This survey looked at opt out rates of juniors in high school only, and spring is typically a very busy time for these students. AP tests and the SATs are typically taken during this window. In previous years, Maine used the SATs as its assessment for juniors. Some administrators shared that this test was meaningful to students, and they had a desire to perform well as it was very likely to influence their college application process.

When the switch to the SBAC MEA was made in 2015, some students chose to focus instead on tests that they felt had more meaning; such as the AP exams or the SAT. One administrator described it as keeping their "eyes on the prize." The SBAC MEA did not have enough value attached to it to make it a priority for those students.

However, this possible factor of opt out also has ties to achievement. Generally, it would likely be higher achieving students taking AP exams or seriously preparing for the SAT. If it was these students opting out, then, again, the scores of a school would be misrepresented due to a particular population opting out.

**Table 3:** Potential Factors of Opt Out from Data

Table 3 shows the potential factors that influenced students opting out given by superintendents during data collection. Many superintendents listed more than one factor as affecting opt out.

<i>School</i>	<i>Social/Media</i>	<i>SES</i>	<i>Timeframe</i>	<i>“Tested Out”</i>
A		✓		✓
B		✓		
C	✓	✓		✓
D	✓		✓	
E	✓		✓	✓
F	✓	✓	✓	
G		✓	✓	✓

*Implications of Opt Out*

When the testing was occurring (spring of 2015), skewed test score results (due to any of the above possible trends or others not discovered in this survey) could have had an impact on the schools. Under the No Child Left Behind act (NCLB), it was required that at least 95% of students to participate in mandated testing in order to receive funds. “If fewer than 95% of the students in a given school or district take the test (based on 3-year rolling averages) that school cannot make AYP [Adequate Yearly Progress].” (FairTest). Not making AYP could mean a potential loss of federal funding. The largest amount of funding was tied to Title I of NCLB.

“Title I funds are targeted to high-poverty schools and districts and used to provide educational services to students who are educationally disadvantaged or at risk of failing to meet state standards. In some form, Title I has existed since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), when the federal government first began to authorize formula grants to states and districts for the education of elementary and secondary students with low academic achievement who are enrolled in schools serving low-income areas.” (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2004).

While states were not required to participate in the NCLB requirements (which include giving standardized assessments), federal funding was directly tied to their participation. If a state chose not to take part in NCLB, they would no longer receive federal funding. States also had the opportunity to apply for a waiver from NCLB, which would allow them to bypass the AYP goals, as long as they were still following the requirements under their waiver. (McCann). Maine was one of the states that successfully applied for (and received a waiver) from the federal government. However, the state still had to show that it was making progress towards its’ goals outlined in the waiver, meaning that successful standardized testing was still necessary for Maine.

“Maine joins 39 other states that have successfully applied for flexibility since 2011 because the accountability requirements of NCLB- including 100 percent student proficiency in math and reading by 2014- were universally unobtainable and not sensitive to the individual challenges of schools and states, especially



rural ones. Currently, about 67 percent of Maine's elementary school students and 48 percent of high school students have achieved proficiency in math and reading. As a result, without the waiver, many schools in the state could have been subject to federal sanctions. Instead, Maine will be allowed to focus finite federal resources on the schools most in need with a goal of cutting in half the percentage of non-proficient students and raising the graduation rate to 90 percent at each Title I school in the state over the next six years." (Warren, 2013).

Because of these requirements, the high opt out numbers had a potentially negative impact for schools due to the funding tied to NCLB. Particular populations of students opting out could mean skewed scores, which could lead to other impacts as Maine works toward its' goal of proficiency stated above. If scores are skewed either high or low, there could be a misrepresentation of student progress on these assessments. If, as the data collected in this study suggests, high achieving students are opting out, then the schools' scores for the assessment would appear lower than an accurate representation of their student body would be.

Under NCLB, low test scores (part of not making AYP) have the implication of potentially leading to being identified as a low-performing school. This identification can lead to more steps of intervention that schools have to follow, with the idea being to best support the children at that school who may not be receiving a quality education. For example, "Schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years are identified for 'school improvement,' and must draft a school improvement plan, devote at least 10 percent of federal funds provided under Title I of NCLB to teacher professional development." (McCann). As the consecutive years go on without meeting AYP, schools have more requirements to meet in order to improve. Therefore, skewed test scores and/or high opt out rates of higher achieving students could lead to a school

having to follow through on these requirements, even if they are not technically underperforming.

However, in December of 2015, President Obama repealed the NCLB Act (previously the Elementary and Secondary Education Act) and signed in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This act switched much of the power in making the decisions outlined above from the federal government to the states' government.

However, standardized assessments are still required. The *Summary of the Every Student Succeeds Act, Legislation Reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act* notes that,

“States are required to implement a set of high-quality student academic assessments in math, reading/language arts, and science, and may implement assessments in other subjects. These assessments (with exceptions regarding alternative assessments for certain students) must be administered to all elementary and secondary students and must measure the achievement of all students. Assessments must be aligned with challenging state academic standards.” (2016).

The Maine DOE reported this fact as well: “The new law maintains the requirement that all schools that receive federal money through this act must assess 95 percent of their students each year (in grades 3-8 and third-year high school) in order to receive this money. Maine schools receive more than \$80 million annually through this law.” (Maine Department of Education, 2015).

Therefore, even though Maine has repealed the use of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium designed Maine Educational Assessment, there will be another that takes it place. Maine signed a contract with Measured Progress in December of 2015, and they created Maine's new eMPower assessment that students will be/are already participating in. (Maine Department of Education, 2015). Even though the SBAC MEA will no longer be given, many of the reasons surrounding opt out could apply to

standardized testing in general. The name has changed, but the issues that are underlying are most likely continuous. It will be interesting to see if the opt out movement continues with the new assessment.

## **Roadblocks**

One of the challenging aspects to this research project was that it required the time of superintendents. I found that superintendents are very busy, and are often out of the office as well. They visit schools, attend many meetings or other events, and also have a great deal of work to accomplish within any given day. They do not always follow a set schedule, and their receptionists or assistants do not always know when they will return. This made setting appointments for phone interviews challenging, and led to having to leave voicemails or send emails as an attempt to contact them. I found that many superintendents did not return my calls, or emails, even with follow-up messages. The most successful method was talking to superintendents personally on the phone if I called when they were available and in the office.

The timing of data collection also may have impacted the response rate. I started conducting interviews in December and continued through February. Several school breaks occur during this time, e.g., Christmas and New Year's break, February school vacation; as well as several mid-year assessments take place. All these activities occurring during this period could part of the reason why it was difficult establishing times for interviews.

Another issue faced was that because I was studying high school juniors, some superintendents did not have the data on this population. I then had to call the school principal, or other administrator (such as a curriculum coordinator) that they suggested, and repeat the process of attempting to contact them through phone, but usually having to leave a voicemail or send an email. A few superintendents also needed time to look up the data. To attempt to accommodate this, I sent them an email, but then did not hear back. One superintendent requested further definition of two of the research terms, which

I complied with. I sent a follow-up email the last week of data collection, and received a survey response from one superintendent.

## **Future Directions**

For any further projects covering this topic, or looking to survey superintendents, I would suggest attempting to work within a different timeframe, or possibly considering surveying principals as well. Surveying a larger population might also lead to finding better participation rates. I would still suggest phone calls as a primary method, as the most successful way of making contact I found was when I called the superintendent and they were in the office and had time to talk.

There are several future directions for the issues that this survey and related research have attempted to identify and investigate. For example, a larger data set could be examined, such as all the schools in Maine that had students opt out. Parents could be surveyed to determine their views on opt out, and why (if they did) they opted their child out of the test. Social factors could be further investigated, like media or bandwagon effects. The potential effect of rural, small/close-knit communities, and possible conversations over opting out between parents within the community could be studied as well. The link between socioeconomic status and achievement could be explored further, or the possible correlation between socioeconomic status and parent involvement in/awareness of their child's education. Another measure of SES besides Free/Reduced Lunch (FRL) could be studied, as many administrators reported that social stigmas/pressures often influence high school students to not apply for or bring the required paperwork in to qualify for FRL, thus skewing the actual numbers of students who qualify. Other states that saw opt out movements occur could be surveyed as well.

Another future study could also explore educational policy in the United States, and how it has changed throughout the years. The potential of a relationship between standardized testing companies and the government could be reviewed, and/or the impact

of ESEA's latest reauthorization, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) could be studied.

Any of these further investigations could help to understand the opt out movement to a better degree and determine if the trends this study discovered hold true.

## **Conclusions**

Because this is such a recent issue, the long-term outcomes of the opt-out movement are currently unknown. As the next testing window closes this spring of 2016, based on the research I have done and literature I have read, I believe that several possible results are possible. Parents, students, and organizations could stand by the opt out movement, and the state and federal governments would have to decide whether or not to withhold federal funds from schools not meeting the 95% participation mark due to opt out. ESSA's transfer of some educational decision-making power from the federal government back to the state government could also play a role in the continuance or discontinuance of the opt-out movement. In Maine, the re-implementation of the SAT as a standardized assessment for juniors could possibly decrease opt-out percentages at the high school level. Or, opt-out could persist as a principled movement, and the state would have to decide its next actions for schools not meeting the 95% participation mark.

If opt out does persist, and it does hold true that the higher SES and therefore potentially higher achieving students are the population that is more likely to opt out, then schools and the government will have to determine how to publicly report scores from tests that have high opt out levels. Without making a denotation that opt out occurred, the school would appear to be underperforming, which could be detrimental to the school. Schools could note how many students opted out, and the average GPA of this group of students, or could use statistical models to attempt to create a more accurate picture of the student body by putting back in hypothetical scores (based on GPA) of students who opted out.

Either way, some action by either the federal or state government, or by school districts, should be taken in the area of opt out. This is an important event occurring at



schools in our state, and schools, as well as the government, should be paying attention to the effects that opt out could be having on publicly released scores from standardized testing.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix A: Survey Questions*

1. How many/what percent of students *chose to not take the test* or “opted out” as opposed to missing the test due to absence, illness, etc.?
2. How many/what percent of those students qualified for free/reduced lunch?
3. How many/what percent of those students were high achieving students? How many/what percent of those students were low achieving students?
4. What was your opt-out procedure? Did you publicize the knowledge of opting out and/or the procedure for doing that to families?

*Appendix B: Survey Script*

Introduction: “Hello, my name is Maude Meeker and I’m a student at the University of Maine working on my thesis. I’m researching on student opt-out of this past spring’s Smarter Balanced test given to juniors. I’m looking to see if there are trends within opting out, such as socioeconomic status or achievement levels, and also what impact those trends could have, for example, if high achieving students are opting out, it could negatively impact a school’s scores. Do you have 3-4 minutes to answer a few questions regarding this topic?”

Conclusion: “Thank you so much for your time, I greatly appreciate the valuable information you were able to share, and if you would like to share an email address with me, I’d gladly inform you of the results of my research.”

*Appendix C: Interview Notes*

## **School A**

Interview date: 2/26/16

Interview method: Phone

In this school, there were 170 students in the junior class. 167 of these students were expected to participate in the ELA Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) designed assessment. 37 students took the test (about 22%). The exact numbers varied from subject to subject [students were also tested on math].

In this school, typically students performed at a 70-80% proficiency rate on the SAT [Maine's previous test for juniors]. On this test, the school saw a 67% proficiency rate. The administrator interviewed did not attribute this to a skew in who was opting out, but instead, to the newness of the test, and that it was different from previous years. She shared that she felt that both high and low achieving students opted out. Parents of low-achieving students felt that their child had enough things to work on already, and parents of high-achieving students felt that their child had more important things to study for and didn't bother with this test (keeping "eye on the prize").

The administrator interviewed noted that 10% was a rough figure of the school's population receiving Free/Reduced Lunch (FRL). She explained that because Maine typically has small communities, FRL data is used for income information. However, high school students typically don't bring their forms in (often social stigmas associated with FRL), and she noted that there was a big gap in FRL data between their K-8 schools and their high school.

## **School B**

Interview date: 2/2/16

Interview method: Phone

In this school, 70% of students opted out with parent support. Out of these students, 30% qualified for Free/Reduced Lunch (FRL). High/low achieving students opted out equally; split about 50/50. For this school, opting out was brought up as a meeting agenda item in November, and consequently, an open-session school board meeting was held in December where parents and community members had the opportunity to share what they thought about the test and what they wanted to see happen. After this, the administrator interviewed wrote a letter to parents of students who would take the test informing them of the option of opting out and how to do so.

### **School C**

Interview date: 2/9/16

Interview method: Phone

At this school, approximately 60% of students opted out of taking the test. The administrator interviewed did not know the exact percentage of those students who opted out that received Free/Reduced Lunch (FRL), but did note that around 55% of the high school received FRL. Based on rough calculations and average grades, the administrator interviewed felt that on average, higher performing students were opting out at this school.

School C sent home a letter encouraging students to take the test, but did also have a form for parents to opt out. The administrator interviewed shared that this school tested towards the end of the testing window, and had a number of students who didn't fill out the opt out form but also didn't show up to take the test, which led to their opt out



procedure breaking down. He listed the media coverage and bandwagon effects as possible causes for this.

### **School D**

Interview date: 2/24/16

Interview method: Email (data listed below is verbatim from administrator interviewed)

School D had 55% of students opt out of the test. Of these students, 52% qualified for Free/Reduced Lunch (FRL), which was roughly the same as their school FRL rate. For this interview, the administrator interviewed asked for clarification on the terms high and low achieving. High-achieving was considered average A & B students, and low-achieving was considered average D range students. Based on these terms, about 37% were “high-achieving”, including all 4 students who were named honors parts this year and about 37% were “low-achieving.”

School D did have an opt-out procedure: “We did not publicize the option, but there was plenty of media coverage state-wide. We tested later in the window, so our parents were aware from media coverage. Parents were required to request opting out in writing. We required parents to meet with me, understand that opting out could have negative ramifications for the student and school, and if the parents still wanted to pull their child out, they could.”

### **School E**

Interview date: 2/24/16

Interview method: Phone

At School E, a little over half (35-40%) of students opted out. This rate was high for the surrounding areas. Timing was a factor, since the juniors had already been tested, this was a new test, and the SAT has more value. The superintendent didn't feel that SES was a factor: they tested during the day, kids felt tested out, media coverage was a factor, and parents were asking questions about the test.

Between high-/low-achieving, there was a balance ("likely a mix of both"), and a lot of kids who did take the test were of mixed abilities. Some of the high students already had 4-5 AP classes, were already tested a lot, and therefore opted out. The timing (end of testing window) was already tough on juniors because they had already taken SATs and AP exams. The school didn't publicize opt-out, but sent out packet of letters/test prep to families, part of that was if student was opting-out, they needed a letter stating that and saying why so the school could have it in their records.

## **School F**

Interview date: 2/2/16

Interview method: Phone

At the elementary school in School F's district, the test was administered at the beginning of the window before the phenomenon, and there was low opt-out. There was a much higher compliance level; 2 students opted out, but their parents had concerns of a political nature beyond the state of Maine. At School F, the test was scheduled at the end of the testing window, and there was wide discussion of opting-out. In particular, neighboring districts had already administered the test, and there were student to student discussions about the test on social media.

Parents had the right of opting-out, and the school did notify parents, but opt-out was not utilized until close to the testing window. The school saw a surge days prior to the assessment, and then a mini-surge on the day of assessment. The superintendent's general perception of the opt-out was that it was more related to peer-related connections and sociological factors. He related the initial wave to "peer mania" and a "join the herd" mentality. Once students realized that it was not just a free day, and that they would have to take an alternative, locally developed/administered assessment, that wave broke.

Students across the spectrum of academic standing opted out. One other factor was that School F provided an alternate, in-house, non-state assessment for opt-outs. Some students withdrew their opt-out request after learning of the alternate test. Two students the superintendent talked to about this told him that they didn't feel bad not taking the state assessment, but were concerned about not taking the teacher's assessment. They didn't place as much value on the state assessment, and therefore didn't put much effort into it.

Overall, the superintendent felt as though the primary cause for opt out was individual, complex, social factors that were different for each student and influenced both student and parent choices, not characteristics of any individual. Initially, over a half of the students opted out, but it ended up being about a third that did not take the test. The rationale/articulated attitude towards the test (as noted above in the student conversation) was reflected in the outcome of the test [scores], and those factors further invalidate the results as useful.

### **School G**

Interview date: 2/24/16

Interview method: Phone

At the middle school in School G's district, they saw a 95% participation rate. At School G, there was a 95% participation rate on the 1st day, which then dropped to 75-80% on the second day. School G began testing the day before the state cancelled the test for future years. The high school FRL is approximately 38%, but the district average is 50-54%. Often kids don't return forms due to stigma of getting FRL, so the rate is lower in high school.

The high-/low-achieving students taking the test were, as a guestimate, split 50-50. Mostly, the test lost value in comparison to other factors after it was cancelled by the government. School G did get several requests from parents to opt out, often wanted kids to focus on SAT. They consulted with the state, were encouraged to let parents know, and sent a brochure home. The school required a written opt-out statement.

### **Author's Biography**

Maude S. Meeker was born in Norway, Maine on February 16, 1995. She was raised in Naples, Maine and graduated from Lake Region High School in 2013. At the University of Maine, Maude is majoring in elementary education with a concentration in English as a Second Language. She is a member and the current treasurer of Kappa Delta Pi, International Honor Society in Education. She has received a University of Maine Presidential Award, a Robert & Evelyn Supple Scholarship, and a Cumberland County Retired Educators Association Scholarship.

Next semester, Maude will complete her student teaching, part of which will be abroad in Santiago, Chile. Upon her graduation in December of 2016, Maude plans to travel and search for a teaching position in the following year.