

Opt-out movement accelerates amid Common Core testing

By CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY
Associated Press

ATLANTA — Thousands of students are opting out of new standardized tests aligned to the Common Core standards, defying the latest attempt by states to improve academic performance.

This “opt-out” movement remains scattered but is growing fast in some parts of the country. Some superintendents in New York are reporting that 60 percent or even 70 percent of their students are refusing to sit for the exams. Some lawmakers, sensing a tipping point, are backing the parents and teachers who complain about standardized testing.

Resistance could be costly: If fewer than 95 percent of a district’s students participate in tests aligned with Common Core standards, federal money could be withheld, although the U.S. Department of Education said that hasn’t happened.

“It is a theoretical club administrators have used to coerce participation, but a club that is increasingly seen as a hollow threat,” said Bob Schaeffer with the National Center for Fair & Open Testing, which seeks to limit standardized testing.

And so the movement grows: This week in New York, tens of thousands of students sat out the first day of tests, with some districts reporting more than half of students opting out of the English test. Preliminary reports suggest an overall increase in opt-outs compared to last year, when about 49,000 students did not take English tests and about 67,000 skipped math tests, compared to about 1.1 million students who did take the tests in New York.

Considerable resistance also has been reported in Maine, New Mexico, Oregon and Pennsylvania, and more is likely as many states administer the tests in public schools for the first time this spring.



AP Photo/Matt Slacum
Meredith Barber poses with her daughter Gabrielle Schwager, 10, Thursday at their home in Penn Valley, Pa. Barber, a psychologist from the Philadelphia suburb of Penn Valley, has decided Gabrielle will not be taking the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment this year and has been encouraging other parents to opt out.

The defiance dismays people who believe holding schools accountable for all their students’ continuing improvement is key to solving education problems.

Assessing every student each year “gives educators and parents an idea of how the student is doing and ensures that schools are paying attention to traditionally underserved populations,” U.S. Department of Education Spokeswoman Dorie Nolt said in an emailed statement.

Opposition runs across the political spectrum.

Some Republicans and Tea Party activists focus on the Common Core standards themselves, calling them a federal intrusion by President Barack Obama, even though they were developed by the National Governors Association and each state’s education leaders in the

wake of President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind program.

The Obama administration has encouraged states to adopt Common Core standards through the federal grant program known as Race to the Top, and most have, but each state is free to develop its own tests.

In California, home to the nation’s largest public school system and Democratic political leaders who strongly endorse Common Core standards, there have been no reports of widespread protests to the exams — perhaps because state officials have decided not to hold schools accountable for the first year’s results.

But in deep-blue New York, resistance has been encouraged by the unions in response to Democratic Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s efforts to make the test results count more in teacher evaluations.

Parents of marathon victim say take death penalty off table

BOSTON (AP) — The parents of the youngest victim of the Boston Marathon bombing are urging federal authorities to consider taking the death penalty off the table for the man convicted in the case.

Bill and Denise Richard, whose 8-year-old son, Martin, was one of three people killed by the April 2013 explosions at the marathon’s finish line, say in a front-page piece in Friday’s *Boston Globe* that sentencing Dzhokhar Tsarnaev to death “could bring years of appeals and prolong reliving the most painful day of our lives,” they said.

They wrote that when Tsarnaev fades from the media spotlight and public view they can start “rebuilding our lives and family.”

The Richards never mention Tsarnaev by name, simply calling him “the defendant,” and stressed that they are speaking only for themselves.

U.S. Attorney for Boston Carmen Ortiz says she is aware of the Richards’ view but cannot comment on the specifics.

“But as I have previously assured both Bill and De-

nise, I care deeply about their views and the views of the other victims and survivors,” Ortiz said.

Jennifer Lemmerman, the sister of Massachusetts Institute of Technology police officer Sean Collier who was killed by Tsarnaev and his older brother days after the explosions, has also spoken out against the death penalty on her Facebook page, in posts that have since been removed.

Relatives of other victims have expressed support of the death penalty.

When it announced its decision to seek the death penalty, the Justice Department cited the killing of a police officer, the death of a child and the choice of the Boston Marathon as a target because its huge crowds provided an opportunity for maximum bloodshed.

Robert Blecker, a New York Law School professor and death penalty expert, said it’s highly doubtful the statement by the Richards will sway the Justice Department.

“Victims and the survivors play a role — they should have a voice — but the reason they don’t get a veto and shouldn’t get a veto is because often there are larger interests at stake,” said Blecker, who said he supports the death penalty for Tsarnaev.

“The question here is one of terrorism and partly a statement of denunciation of terrorism because that is one of the purposes of the death penalty,” he said.

The penalty phase of Tsarnaev’s trial starts Tuesday, the day after this year’s marathon.

Florida senator: Decade-old oil leak is ‘unacceptable’

BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — A U.S. senator from Florida is pressing federal officials to disclose technical data and other information about a decade-old oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico, after an investigation by The Associated Press revealed evidence that the spill is far worse than a company or government regulators have publicly reported.

In a letter Friday to Interior Secretary Sally Jewell and Department of Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson, Sen. Bill Nelson said it is “unacceptable” that oil is still leaking from the site off Louisiana’s coast where an oil platform owned by Taylor Energy Company toppled during Hurricane Ivan in 2004.

The Florida Democrat, who is the ranking member of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science & Transportation, told Jewell and Johnson that “all necessary resources” should be committed to stopping the oil from flowing.

“If you’ve got an oil rig that’s been leaking for 11 years, then it’s time for us to find out what’s going on,” Nelson said during a telephone interview.

Taylor has downplayed the leak’s extent and environmental impact. The New Orleans-based company recently touted a year-old estimate that less than 4 gallons per day is spilling at the site where its cluster of 28 wells remain buried under sediment from a mudslide triggered by Ivan’s waves.

But the Coast Guard provided AP with a new leak estimate that is about 20 times greater than the one cited by Taylor.

AP’s analysis of more than 2,300 pollution reports to the Coast Guard since 2008 showed a dramatic spike in sheen sizes and oil volumes since Sept. 1, 2014. That came just after federal regulators held a workshop to improve the accuracy of slick estimates reported by a Taylor contractor and started sending government observers on monitoring flights over the site.

When presented by AP with evidence of the spike, the Coast Guard attributed it to an improved method for estimating the slicks from the air — with the clear implication that far more oil had been spilling for years than had been reported.

The government-managed effort to stop the leak has been shrouded in secrecy. Nelson’s letter asks Jewell and Johnson for “prompt and full disclosure” of:

- Subsea images or other data gathered underwater at the leak site.
- Aerial imagery of the sheens spotted at the site.
- Flow rate estimates since the leak started in September 2004.
- Information about the geological and geophysical formation at the site — “and the ways in which your agencies considered that information in exploration and response planning.”

After BP’s massive Gulf oil spill in 2010, Nelson criticized the London-based oil giant’s reluctance to publicly release videos of its underwater gusher. BP eventually broadcast a live video feed that showed its efforts to stop the spill, which dwarfed even the highest estimate of Taylor’s leak.



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Featured Speaker
Judy Hill Lovins of Aspen Colorado, a fine art photographer and “homegrown” native of Hermiston, will share her life story.

Blue Mountain Community College

Alumni in the Spotlight



Catherine Heath
BMCC Class of 2012
Radiologic Technologist

Catherine Heath grew up in Lone and knew she wanted to go into diagnostic imaging. She chose BMCC as an affordable option to complete her general studies prior to transferring to a diagnostic imaging program at Linn-Benton Community College.

“I was able to do all of my prerequisites through BMCC to get into the diagnostic imaging program. BMCC gave me all of the tools I needed to be successful in my program.” Now this lone native is a successful - and very busy! - radiologic technologist for St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton.



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