



Anti-test parents are opting children out of opportunity (OPINION)

opt out.JPG

Kristen Couse walks with her son, Wile, on the playground at Public School 261 April 16 in the Brooklyn borough of New York. According to Couse, her fifth-grade son and the majority of his classmates are opting out of a state-mandated testing program. *(AP Photo/Mark Lennihan)*

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By Kathy Swift

The Office of Senator Mark Hass

FROM THE DESK OF
SENATOR BETSY JOHNSON

Almost every state in the country, including Oregon, has adopted higher standards for what students need to know and be able to do as they move through school. With tougher educational standards came tougher tests to measure students' progress. These end-of-year tests in English and math – called Smarter Balanced – have been a source of contention and confusion amongst Oregon parents and community members since the testing window opened this spring.

This confusion has sparked an opt-out movement, where parents are refusing to allow their children to take these tests. By doing so, they deprive themselves of valuable information about their child. On a larger scale, the tests serve a greater purpose: to gauge the health of Oregon's educational systems. When parents opt students out of the test, educational leaders and policy makers have less reliable information to improve services and target resources and supports to kids.

We have a responsibility to continually improve our educational system, and these end-of-the-year tests provide valuable information. I remember well the anxiety annual testing caused my son, who graduated from an Oregon public high school and is now a junior at the University of Oregon. I viewed that part of my job as parent was to help my son to understand that the test is not a measure of worth, but rather a tool to figure out where he can improve his skill set. I understood that without it, I as a parent, his teachers and those responsible for funding public education in the state don't have the feedback they need to back up whether their investments in time, instruction and dollars are effective. Not knowing where the knowledge gaps are won't help fix them. As a parent and business leader in Oregon, I encourage parents to talk to their teacher or school administrator about testing concerns before deciding to opt their student out.

In my role as chair of Oregon Business Association's Education Policy Committee, I have long been troubled by some sobering statistics. First, Oregon has the second lowest graduation rate in the country. We're also lagging when it comes to test scores. And while no test is the perfect performance indicator for all students, assessments help teachers, parents and students better understand what an individual needs to prepare for further education and careers. Sadly, in 2014, 30 percent of high school juniors failed the high school math test, 16 percent failed the reading test and 41 percent failed the writing test, little to no improvement from the low levels of 2013.

Strategies to bridge achievement gaps and improve our graduation rates are just now beginning to show results. Oregon has not chosen an easy path, but it is one that can result in more students prepared for next steps.

As a female executive working for a large Oregon employer, I know how critical it is for students to not only finish school, but go on to further their education and careers with critical skills they need to succeed in the workplace.

Opting out only leaves our children more vulnerable. I encourage students and parents to choose a path that will leave them as prepared as possible for the challenges ahead. Don't opt out of opportunity.

Kathy Swift chairs the Oregon Business Association Education Policy Committee.

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