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Inside Explore!

TOP STORIES

LONG ISLAND IS HUB

19 of 20 districts with top boycott rates are local

BY JOHN HILDEBRAND

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Long Island is opt-out central for New York, laying claim to 19 of the 20 school systems statewide with the highest numbers of students boycotting standardized tests, a Newsday analysis shows.

Upstate, the movement has gained a foothold, too, but still isn't as popular as it is in Nassau and Suffolk counties, the review found.

The biggest boycotts draw students mostly from middle-class communities in Suffolk. Comsewogue and Rocky Point, for example, had opt-out rates higher than 80 percent. Commack, Eastport-South Manor and Middle Country had rates of more than 65 percent.

Of 100 districts statewide with the highest numbers of test refusals, 70 are on the Island. All have opt-out rates of 45 percent or higher, according to the analysis. Statewide, opt-out rates averaged 18 percent. The average for the Nassau-Suffolk region stood about 50 percent.

Newsday reviewed the test results in English Language Arts and mathematics, released in late September by the state Education Department. More than 950,000 students in grades three through eight took the exams, while more than 210,000 opted out. Of those who boycotted the tests, more than 90,000 live on the Island.

The opt-out movement, now in its sixth year, appears most successful in middle-class communities, which political experts attribute largely to close contacts there between parents and teachers. Many live in the communities; they have children in school and they carry weight with parents when they express doubt about the benefit of state exams. And educators belong to strong unions, which have pushed hard to keep student scores from being tied to mandatory teacher evaluations, the experts said.

"Parents themselves want to



On Long Island, 97 percent of school districts — 120 out of 124 — fall below the national standard for

believe they live in a great school district, and they wonder why our kids need to take all these tests," said Michael Dawidziak, a Sayville-based consultant who has worked mostly with Republicans at the national level. "And teachers will say, 'This is hindering our ability to teach in the classroom.'"

Teachers and parents do tend to work together in suburban schools, particularly when teachers themselves are involved parents, said Joseph Romano, a high school band director and an officer of the Levittown teachers union. But Romano dismissed any suggestion that teachers are strictly self-centered in their opposition to standardized testing.

The big picture

"Teachers are parents, too," he said. "To insinuate that we don't have the children's best interests at heart is completely divorced from reality."

Along with the test results, officials announced that statewide boycott rates had dropped by three percentage points since 2016 — an outcome that state Education Commissioner Mary-ellen Elia described as "moving in the right direction."

Despite the dip in statewide rates, the analysis found, the opt-out movement remains robust throughout most areas of upstate New York. Clusters of school systems with opt-out rates above 30 percent can be found in the lower Hudson region, the Mohawk Valley and the Buffalo suburbs, and in communities scattered from the Canadian border to the Pennsylvania state line.

Thirty-six of the state's 57 counties have at least one school district with an opt-out rate above 30 percent, the review found. Those numbers exclude the five boroughs of New York City, where test refusals are relatively rare.

The full extent of test refusals in New York State can be gauged by the total number of districts falling below the national standard for student participation, which requires at least 95 percent of students in grades three through eight to take exams each year in both English and math.

By that measure, 85 percent of districts statewide — 612 of 718 — fall short of the standard. Of the 124 systems in Nassau and Suffolk, 120 or nearly 97 percent don't make the mark. The analysis excluded public charter schools, which operate independently and report few test refusals.

One upstate opt-out stronghold is Dolgeville, a village of 2,200 residents where factories are gradually giving way to craft shops and antique stores.

In April and May, 81.8 percent of eligible Dolgeville students missed state tests — a rate surpassed only by Comse-

FOR STATE TEST OPT-OUTS



School districts with biggest test boycott rates in New York State

District	County	% of students boycotting tests
1 Comsewogue	Suffolk	86.8%
2 Rocky Point	Suffolk	82.0%
3 Dolgeville	Herkimer/Fulton	81.8%
4 Greenport	Suffolk	80.7%
5 Patchogue-Medford	Suffolk	79.3%
6 Shoreham-Wading River	Suffolk	78.4%
7 Plainedge	Nassau	78.0%
8 Bayport-Blue Point	Suffolk	74.7%
9 Connetquot	Suffolk	74.7%
10 Sayville	Suffolk	73.2%
11 East Islip	Suffolk	72.6%
12 Lindenhurst	Suffolk	72.4%
13 Miller Place	Suffolk	72.3%
14 Sachem	Suffolk	72.2%
15 Bellmore-Merrick	Nassau	70.6%
16 West Islip	Suffolk	70.6%
17 Middle Country	Suffolk	70.0%
18 Eastport-South Manor	Suffolk	69.0%
19 Seaford	Nassau	67.5%
20 Commack	Suffolk	67.1%

SOURCE: STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

DATABASE

Percentages of LI students who opted out of state exams.

newsday.com/data

Washington is pressuring New York to boost testing participation. State education officials have responded by setting up a complex system of academic indexes and mathematical formulas, which could lower the ratings of schools with high opt-out refusal rates.

Later this year, state education officials plan to use the indexes in identifying schools considered low academic achievers. Those designated, known as schools in need of Comprehensive Support and Improvement, or CSI, face penalties — even possible closure — if they don't improve.

Schools with both high opt-out rates and high academic performance shouldn't worry that they will be tapped as a CSI school, state officials said. The list is meant to include at least the bottom 5 percent of schools statewide.

"The department remains confident that schools that are high-performing but also have high opt-out rates will not be identified for Comprehensive Support and Improvement," said Emily DeSantis, spokeswoman for the Education Department.

On the Island, the reaction to the state's new rating system is mixed. Some superintendents of districts with high opt-out rates are confident they won't be penalized. Others are taking a wait-and-see attitude.

"Until you know what makes up the algorithm, you can't be sure what the outcome will be," said Roberta Gerold, superintendent of the Middle Country system. "I have a hard time believing that we're not going to be consequential by it."

Michael Hynes, the schools chief in Patchogue-Medford and an outspoken critic of current testing, also worries about the possibility of state sanctions.

"I think as superintendents, we're always leery of the state punishing school districts for something they have no control over," Hynes said.

student participation in statewide standardized tests.

wogue and Rocky Point. The district's superintendent, Lynn Rhone, noted that opt-outs have declined a bit but that many parents remain concerned.

Katie Juchheim, the director of an independent preschool in the village and a parent herself, first learned of problems with the state testing program several years ago, when she was talking to a mother in another district who also happened to be a teacher.

"I did more research and learned that they weren't like the tests we took as kids, that they were developmentally inappropriate — often written a few grade levels above," stated Juchheim, who has pulled her own two children out of the tests.

Pros and cons

New York's opt-out movement cropped up in 2013, then exploded two years later and remains the biggest in the nation.

A key point made from the beginning by the anti-testing side is that standardized testing puts too much pressure on students and teachers alike.

"The state Education Department hasn't done enough to restore trust and confidence in the system," said Jolene DiBrango, executive vice president of New York State United Teachers, a statewide union umbrella group. "That's why you're seeing the numbers remain pretty steady across the state."

Any failure to quiet the public controversy hasn't been for lack of trying. In the past few years, the state Education Department has given students unlimited time to finish the exams, hired a new testing company and changed the name — from Common Core to Next Generation.

In its biggest shift so far, the department this year cut the number of testing days from six to four.

Test supporters think the agency has gone to great lengths in responding to critics.

One is Ian Rosenblum of the Education Trust-New York, a nonprofit research and advocacy group that is funded in part by grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Software billionaire Bill Gates is one of the nation's most vocal supporters of raising academic standards.

"These test results are a vital measure to help students, educators and the public understand where schools are succeeding and can be models, where schools are under-serving students, particularly the most vulnerable young people — and should focus on improvement," said Rosenblum, the group's executive director.

For opponents, the state still has far to go.

Union leaders and opt-out organizers want a new law that would drop the mandatory link

between test scores and teacher evaluations. A statewide moratorium on enforcing that system is now in place, but expires in June 2019.

Activists also seek new testing benchmarks that would help more students pass the exams. In the spring, Long Island students scored proficiency rates of 49.7 percent in English and 52.1 percent in math. Students statewide had rates of 45.2 percent and 44.5 percent, respectively.

The road ahead

Others such as Lisa Rudley of New York State Allies for Public Education, a coalition of parent and educator groups, see the need to completely overhaul testing.

"Continuing to use these flawed tests is not going to improve education," said Rudley, who also serves on the Ossining school board in Westchester County.