Towards an Understanding of the Testing Opt-Out Movement: Why Parents Choose to Opt Out or Opt In

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“A partner is someone who makes you more than you are, simply by being by your side.”

Albert Kim

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Michael Paladino.
Abstract

Towards an Understanding of the Testing Opt-Out Movement: Why Parents Choose to Opt Out or Opt In

Margaret Paladino

Long Island, New York has led the nation in parent opt-out rates. The Opt-Out Movement is a grassroots coalition of opposition to high-stakes tests that are used to sort students, evaluate teachers, and rank schools. Approximately 50% of students in grades three to eight opted out of the English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics tests in 2019 (“Projects: ELA and Math Opt-Outs 2016-2019,” 2019). Quantitative research has shown a racial disparity between parents who opted out and opted in with White, middle-class parents participating in the opt-out movement at greater rates than Latinx, Black, and Asian parents (Au, 2017; Bennett, 2016a; Hildebrand, 2017; Klein, 2016; Murphy, 2017; Phi Delta Kappa & Gallup Poll, 2017; Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky, 2016; Ryan, 2016; Tompson, Benz, & Agiesta, 2013). Yet, there is a lack of qualitative research regarding how and why White, middle-class parents are more likely to participate in the opt-out movement.

Grounded in the theories of Christiansen’s (2009) four-stage model of a social movement, Bourdieu’s (1973, 1984) social capital theory, and rational choice theory (Abell, 1992; Coleman & Fararo, 1992; Mooney-Marini, 1992; Münch, 1999; Scheff, 1992), this study utilized a phenomenological multi-case research design to examine how parents in high, medium, and low opt-out districts made their decision to opt out or opt into the ELA and math tests in the fourth and fifth grade. It also explored how superintendents and principals made sense of their opt-out rates in their respective districts and how each district’s procedures and policies that are in place, if any, regarding information about testing
and opting out influenced the process. I conducted face-to-face, 30-60 minute, semi-structured interviews with three superintendents, four principals (two from one district), and 16-20 parents from each district \((n = 59)\). I sought to understand and make sense of the essence of the opt-out movement by asking participants about their lived experiences. The compiled interview data were triangulated with district documents and observational field note data obtained from PTA and PTSA meetings.

As a result of the transcribed and coded interview data, three overarching findings emerged. First, I discovered that the districts’ messaging about state testing and parents’ right to opt out was reflected in the opt-out rates. The high opt-out district disseminated the most information about testing and parents’ rights to opt out. Meanwhile, the low opt-out district held pep rallies and pizza challenges to incentivize opting in. Second, although the opt-out movement’s original aim was to improve public school education for the greater good, the parents interviewed in this study made individualistic choices for their child about opting out or opting in based on the information they had access to from the district and social networks of information, as well as their philosophies of parenting and education. Finally, regardless of parent involvement levels, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic status, parents’ reasons for opting out or opting in were based on superficial reasoning and were more similar than different across the three districts.

Parents are powerful policy actors that have been shown to influence policy at the district and school level (Bakeman, 2018). This dissertation has important implications for state legislation that supports a more equitable assessment and accountability system—one that (a) does not undermine the student and teacher relationship, (b) reports reliable individual growth of the students, (c) does not put undue pressure on low-income districts of
color to raise scores or get sanctioned, and (d) fosters teaching and learning grounded in comprehensive educational pedagogy instead of test-prep materials for corporate profit.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

“Parents have a right and responsibility to protect their children from flawed tests” (Deutermann, 2016).

The explosion of test refusals for the New York State assessments in grades three to eight is a grassroots social crusade known as the opt-out movement. In 2015, 20% of the 1.1 million or 220,000 eligible students in New York State refused to take state tests in English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics, and although the refusals in 2019 were lower at 16%, New York State continued to maintain the lead in opt-out rates across the U.S. (Bakeman, 2018; Hildebrand, 2018; NYSED, 2019). On Long Island, New York, half of all eligible students, or 75,515, refused to take the third through eighth-grade ELA standardized test in 2018 (Tyrrell & Ebert, 2019). Most of the reporting associated with the opt-out movement is from news reports or press releases that display statistics about the opt-out rates, including percentages broken down by school district and grade level, as well as students’ eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch, and student racial/ethnic background.

In a survey conducted by Pizmony-Levy and Green Saraisky (2016), the majority of those who participate in the opt-out movement are White, middle-class, and highly educated parents. The findings of their study are consistent with the statistics on Long Island, given the fact that the highest opt-out rates—ranging from 50-70%—are in affluent, predominantly White suburban districts (Hildebrand, Clukey, Jones, & Ebert, 2018). What is missing from the literature is how parents get information about the opt-out movement and why parents choose to opt out or opt in their children. This gap in the literature is the focus of this dissertation, which explored and compared fourth-and fifth-grade parents’ experiences with
the opt-out movement across three Long Island districts with high, medium, and low opt-out rates.

Drawing on the theoretical framework of Bourdieu’s (1973, 1984) social capital theory, I sought to make sense of how the information about parents’ right to opt out of state tests was communicated from school to home and parent to parent through social networks, and the difference in views towards testing among parent demographic groups across and within the three chosen school districts. Additionally, I drew upon Christiansen’s (2009) four stages of a social movement model: emergence, coalescence, bureaucratization, and decline, to highlight when each district’s opt-out movement began, how it has been sustained over time, and continues to grow, if at all. I also identified which stage each district is in according to the model. Lastly, I employed rational choice theory to better understand the parental decision-making process (Abell, 1992; Coleman & Fararo, 1992; Mooney-Marini, 1992; Münch, 1999; Scheff, 1992).

Survey findings from the limited literature on this topic have shown that parents who participate in the opt-out movement generally are opposed to the high-stakes nature of the tests, including some who think: (a) the tests are too difficult and not aligned with the curriculum, (b) the intrusion of corporate reform in education fosters a top-down model of standards and accountability is inappropriate, and (c) the evaluation of teachers and schools based on aggregated test score outcomes is unfair and racially and socio-economically motivated (Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky, 2016). High-stakes testing is defined as any test used to make important decisions about students, teachers, schools, and districts based on test scores (Croft, Roberts, & Stenhouse, 2016).
In this chapter, I discuss the history of testing from the inception of the Intelligent Quotient test (IQ) to present-day high-stakes standardized tests. I also discuss the beginning of the resistance movement, the participants, and their accomplishments as testing evolved from high-stakes, to low-stakes, and back to high-stakes testing and what that means for all stakeholders involved. Furthermore, I touch upon the change from testing for informing educational pedagogy to a rewards and punishment system of educational practices. Then, I describe the statement of the problem and the significance of the study. Next, I state the purpose of the study and disclose the research questions. I explain the context of my study along with the rationale for my selected research methods and phenomenological design. Finally, I end with an examination of the limitations and assumptions for my study. After I state the conclusion for Chapter One, I list the terms used in the study and working definitions.

The History of and the Resistance to High-Stakes Testing

For the purpose of examining this study, I take the perspective that within the United States education system, assessing students formatively on particular concepts is a common teaching practice. Even more common is a summative assessment for proficiency and mastery of the subject matter. The theory of testing in education has always been one of informing teaching practice and improving learning and is grounded in educational pedagogy (Brooks, 2018). When the purpose of testing is tied to educational consequences, then it is considered to be high-stakes. Indeed, in the current system of increased privatization and neoliberalism in education, test scores are the sole measurement used to evaluate and compare the teaching and learning within and across schools (Ravitch, 2013). Furthermore, test scores have been tied to graduation and grade promotion, funding, and school closure
decisions (Au, 2015). How did the US education system become a high-stakes testing system? Who were the early resistors to high-stakes testing that led to the current parent opt-out movement?

**IQ Testing in the 1920s**

The practice of ability grouping and tracking in schools based on test scores dates back to 1920 when there was an influx of European immigrants, specifically from southern and eastern Europe, into the public school system (Allen, 2006; Au, 2015). Henry H. Goddard used a modified version of Alfred Binet’s “intelligent quotient” or IQ test on immigrants and found fair-skinned northern Europeans from Nordic and Anglo-Saxon descent scored higher than those from southern and eastern Europe and the Mediterranean, who were darker skinned and did not speak English (Allen, 2006). During this time, the southern and eastern European population scored significantly lower on the IQ tests than the Northern Europeans, and African Americans scored the lowest (Allen, 2006; Au, 2015). Au (2015) suggested that the use of test scores for tracking decisions and the belief in eugenics, that behavior and character traits were genetic, were tools that fostered White supremacy in the United States. Although some immigrants did not speak English, thereby making the tests inaccurate, schools responded by using IQ testing to track students into academic and vocational levels.

**Resistance.** Walter Lippmann, an American journalist, was opposed to the practice of IQ testing for tracking decisions in schools and challenged the accuracy, reliability, and validity of the tests. His argument was that the test was a set of tasks and not a measure of innate ability. Lipmann also believed that IQ tests are unscientific and undemocratic in school practices (Kaestle, 2012). Other early resistors to testing were Horace Mann Bond, an

**The National Educational Standards and Accountability Movements: 1980-2000s**

The current system of neoliberal education reform based on standards, accountability, and choice has its roots in the 1980s. Although the theme of their education policies was not high-stakes testing, it is important to note that during the terms of Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Bill Clinton, the focus of universal higher order standards, merit pay for teachers, and the inclusion of corporate entities marked the beginning of privatization in education reforms. From President Reagan’s *A Nation at Risk* (“United States Department of Education,” 1983) to Presidents Bush and Clinton’s launch of America 2000 and Goals 2000 legislations, the education system shifted from a more decentralized system that emphasized the state and local role to a centralized federal role that pushed for national standards as well as school choice to give parents more options in education (“America 2000,” 1991; Ravitch, 2013).

It was not until 2002, when President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), that a system of testing and accountability designed to close the achievement gap became law. Au (2015) defined the achievement gap as “having proportional rates of failure and success amongst different groups,” as, realistically, not every child will pass the test even though that was the states’ goal (p. 30). Under the NCLB Act,
schools were required to test every child in grades three to eight in reading and math and report their test score data aggregated by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, and limited English proficiency (Ravitch, 2010, 2013). Proponents of NCLB viewed the policy as creating more educational equity. However, opponents viewed it, instead, as creating more inequity through the use of high-stakes testing. Students deemed to be inadequate on the proficiency scales were often seen as risks to the school’s Adequate Yearly Progress. It was reported that some schools were administratively withdrawing these at-risk students from the school and labeled them a liability (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Other tactics to produce “no high-scoring child behind” (Nichols & Berliner, 2007, pp. 61-62) included transitioning students into a GED program that removed them from NCLB regulations, temporary suspension, and manipulating the data by selective reporting of test scores (McNeil, 2000).

The goal of NCLB was 100% proficiency, but it did not set clear and determined cut scores, so scores were easily adjusted by each state to appear proficient (Berliner, 2008; Mathis, 2010). The provisions of NCLB set the stage for narrowing the curriculum to English and math at the expense of other subjects not tested. Repetitive test questions and test design created a “teach to the test” philosophy, the opportunity to cheat by manipulating test scores, and tampering with the teacher-student relationship in which the teacher’s role as support provider changed to disconnected proctor of the test (Berliner, 2008; Kousholt, 2016). By 2014, the testing for 100% proficiency goal of NCLB was not working and many schools in the nation, even those considered high-performing schools, were under the failure status as 100% proficiency was an unrealistic target. The outcome of NCLB gave rise to entrepreneurial opportunities in the form of private tutoring companies, special test-preparatory materials to boost test scores, consulting agencies devised to help schools to
improve their proficiency status, and charter schools as an alternative to the public schools (Ravitch, 2013).

**Resistance.** High-stakes testing targets teachers and best practices by absorbing teaching time in exchange for test prep. Some teachers opposed what they considered to be the overuse of high-stakes standardized tests because they felt it compromised a well-rounded approach to education (Oulahan, 2008). In October 2007, middle school teacher David Wasserman boycotted the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts exam given at Sennett Middle School (Oulahan, 2008). Another teacher to join the early test refusal movement was Carl Chew, a middle school teacher in Washington State, who, in 2008, refused to administer the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (Oulahan, 2008). One of the main issues for teachers of the testing resistance movement in the early years was, and continues to be, the loss of valuable and enriching problem-based learning in exchange for rote test prep (Brooks, 2018), as well as the loss of the purpose of testing for informing teaching practice to evaluate teachers and schools.

**The Current Era of High-Stakes Testing Reform**

The current era of high-stakes testing came under the guise of school reform under President Barack Obama’s Race to the Top Initiative (RttT) funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. This is when schools across America competed for federal funding and this funding was tied to high-stakes standardized tests as well as other conditions (Mone, 2016). To be eligible for RttT funds, states had to adopt the following four provisions: (a) develop rigorous standards and assessments through the adoption of the Common Core Standards; (b) provide better data systems that allow for teachers, parents, students, and administrators to monitor student progress; (c) support teachers and leaders to
be more effective; and (d) increase the emphasis on resources for rigorous interventions to turn around lowest performing schools (“Race to the Top,” 2016). Engendered by RttT provisions, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, in large, funded research and advocacy that heavily influenced the teacher evaluation system to support their top-down model of neoliberal education reform (Levine, 2018; Rucinski & Diersing, 2014). The Measures of Effective Teaching study was the byproduct of their efforts, and the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) became the way to evaluate teachers and principals by means of a “value-added” model that included standardized test scores as part of the evaluation process instead of by administrators’ observations and student surveys (Levine, 2018; Rucinski & Diersing, 2014).

Race to the Top did not change the use of high-stakes testing to monitor student achievement and caused individual states to legislate APPR measures to evaluate teacher and school success. Nonetheless, RttT invited the opportunity for further privatization by making the adoption of the Common Core State Standards a provision for the eligibility for funds, and the writers of standardized tests and their preparatory materials for the new standards. The use of a value-added system for teacher evaluation dichotomized the teacher and student relationship, as student test scores determined the teacher’s status, and in some cases, employment termination. Additionally, RttT encouraged consultants and vendors who offered services to assist districts as well as promoted an unreliable tool of measurement for teacher accountability. The policy also established inequitable competitions for RttT funds with a system that distributed money through competition and not by need (Leonardatos & Zahedi, 2014; Ravitch, 2013).
In theory, NCLB was supposed to be a social justice policy that set the standards to improve education for all students, raise achievement levels, and close gaps among subgroups. Race to the Top provided funding to schools in need of closing the achievement gaps and garnering racial equality by providing funding that included high-stakes testing. Currently, both reform measures have fallen short of their goals to close the achievement gap and support all students, schools, teachers, and principals in underserved communities because both, in practice, are punishing schools that do not meet the adequate yearly progress goals and those schools are disproportionately low-income, Black, and Latinx schools (Au, 2016a; Lipman, 2011).

**Resistance.** The next group of resisters to join the testing resistance movement was students. Examples of students protesting high-stakes testing include a “play in” at the Chicago Public Schools offices as a protest against the standardized tests in grades K-2 (Au, 2015; “Spring 2013 Test Reform Uprising,” 2013); a student-led zombie march in Providence, Rhode Island, where high school students organized the protest against the New England Common Assessment Program as part of the criteria for graduation (Boney, 2013); as well as student protests in Portland, Oregon, where high school students refused to take the Oregon Assessment of Knowledge and Skills test for science. In each of these cases, students rejected the philosophy that a standardized test score should be used for high-stakes decisions like graduation or tracking placements (Dungca, 2013).

Meanwhile, there has been an upsurge in social media organizations concerning the opt-out movement as teachers, parents, and students unite in solidarity to refuse high-stakes standardized tests (Au, 2015). The first organization to form on Facebook was the United Opt-Out National group in August 2011. Within 48 hours, there were 500 members
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(McDermott, Robertson, Jensen, & Smith, 2015). Their central mission was to resist neoliberal reform and expand the opt-out movement to low-income communities of color (“Movement to End Corporate Education Reform,” n.d.).

Also launched on Facebook was the Badass Teachers Association whose mission was to defend teachers, students, and public education from the overall attack on public education, demonizing teachers, school closings, and promoting privatization (Naison, 2014). Teachers Priscilla Sanstead and Mark Naison created the Facebook page in 2013, not knowing what the response would be from fellow teachers and teacher organizations. As of 2018, the movement’s Facebook page maintains 47,490 followers and has six subgroups under the BAD heading. With the call for solidarity, the Badass Teachers’ mission is “to reduce excess testing, increase teacher autonomy, and include teacher-family voices in legislative processes that affect students” (“Badass Teachers Association,” 2013).

Parents Join the Opt-Out Movement

In 2012, high-stakes standardized testing became part of a key component of APR to evaluate teachers and principals. This practice of evaluating teachers and principals based on test scores received an immediate negative response from parents. In addition, parents became concerned that students were being adversely affected by the standardized tests. Reports surfaced of students crying, losing sleep, not eating, being sick, and suffering from stress and anxiety due to the test prep and long testing schedule (Casbarro, 2005; “Tyranny of Testing,” 2018). Teachers were faced with narrowing the curriculum to test prep, often at the expense of student-centered learning that encouraged and fostered deeper thinking and problem solving in exchange for rote test prep (Cho & Eberhard, 2013). Students had less time for recess and social interactions, and students at risk were recommended for morning
and after-school remedial programs to foster higher test scores (Carlson-Paige, 2014; Deutermann, 2014; Hagopian, 2015).

Many believed it was time for parents to protest. First, Chicago parents started a boycott of the Illinois State Achievement Test, which began with 500 students from 29 Chicago schools (Au, 2015). A more successful parent pushback to testing was in Texas, where parents led a successful campaign to reduce high school end-of-course graduation tests from fifteen to five (“Spring 2013 Test Reform Uprising,” 2013). Teachers and civil rights leaders in Minnesota also were successful in repealing the state’s graduation exam along with other states such as Texas, Washington, and Illinois, because of teacher and parent activism against testing (Au, 2015). As a united coalition of like-minded parents, students, and teachers, test resistance invited the news media and social media as part of their larger strategic plans to draw attention to the ongoing crusade.

With education reform supporting the continuation of high-stakes testing for students in grades three to eight, the negative side effects of the process impacted one Long Island parent in 2014, which is the setting of this dissertation study. Her name is Jeanette Deutermann. She became concerned when her son was distressed and refused to go to school due to the upcoming state tests (Deutermann, 2014). After a lengthy process of investigation to gather information about the test, its purpose, and the usage of the scores, Deutermann researched online and discovered a Facebook page titled Refuse New York. Inspired by social media and due diligence, she exercised her parental right to opt out of the New York State tests in English Language Arts and Mathematics. Once the decision was made, Deutermann shared her findings and philosophy of testing with others via a Facebook group page that she called Long Island Opt-Out Info.
What was once a grassroots movement of teachers and students across the country is now a state and national phenomenon called The Opt-Out Movement. Over the course of four years, parents on Long Island have opted their children out in record numbers with Long Island leading the percentages for New York State (Hildebrand, 2017). Parents who participate in the movement have put their collective voices into action by opting their child out of the New York State tests for grades three to eight. The mission of the opt-out movement is to resist the neoliberal agenda that calls for standardized tests that foster a scripted, narrowed curriculum sold by corporations, which opponents argue take away valuable teaching time and creativity from the non-tested subjects, including physical education, art, and music. In addition, opt-out parents are opposed to test scores being used to evaluate the students, teachers, and schools, as the infiltration of corporate influence in education (Schroeder, Currin, & McCardle, 2018). However, all parents are not equally represented in the opt-out movement. This dissertation investigated the reasons why certain parents opt out and others opt in their child to the state tests.

**Statement of the Problem**

Although the number of students who opt out are high for Long Island as a whole, the numbers do not represent all districts and people equally. There is a lack of qualitative data to understand the reason for the disparity in the demographics of the opt-out participants. Quantitative studies have shown the opt-out movement is composed of mostly White, middle-class, and highly educated parents, but they do not offer reasons why or how this is the case (Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky, 2016; Wang, 2017). This study fills the gap in the literature to explain the disparity between those that participate and do not participate in the opt-out movement, how they made the decision, and why they decided to opt out or opt
their child in to the state tests.

Across New York State, there are districts with opt-out rates that fall within the range from as low as 10% and as high as 79% (Harris, 2015; “Projects: ELA and Math Opt-Outs 2016-2019,” 2019). These statistics do not show who is opting out or not, which cuts across race and socio-economic status (SES) lines, and does not represent the diversity of New York State and Long Island. The question remains, do all parents have the same information and opportunity to make an informed decision to participate or not participate in the opt-out movement?

School districts on Long Island have a variety of demographics, and the philosophy of testing may vary among districts, parents, and schools. In an effort to maintain federal support, schools in low SES neighborhoods send the message to parents that opting out is not the best option for their child or the school. On the other hand, parents living in middle-class to affluent districts have minimal retributions to their child’s education or to the threat of state takeover or school closure. The findings of this dissertation study uncovered the reasons for the disparity in the demographic of participants and nonparticipants in the opt-out movement.

**Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study was to learn about the reasons parents gave for opting out of state tests and to fill in the gap of the literature with a qualitative perspective. In addition, by interviewing parents in three districts—a high, a medium, and a low opt-out rate with varying demographics and SES—this dissertation also provides the viewpoint of Black and Latinx parents. This study aimed to make sense of why there is a racial/ethnic and SES disparity in the participants and nonparticipants of the opt-out movement across Long Island.
The current research is quantitative and lacks the personal stories of those who have a child who is at the age to participate in the NYS tests in English Language Arts and Mathematics.

The findings of this study will show that instead of making learning equal across race/ethnicity and SES, there is greater inequality by using a high-stakes test with punitive ramifications that targets low-performing schools in low SES neighborhoods (Hagopian, 2016). In addition, this study can assist policymakers interested in designing more effective assessments and accountability systems that can monitor individual student growth and help the teaching and learning process as an alternative to using the test scores to evaluate teachers and rate schools based on aggregated student data by schools.

**Purpose of the Study**

While NCLB and RttT claim to close achievement gaps and support underserved schools, the corporate underpinnings of these reforms compromise the education system by placing students’ scores on high-stakes testing as the sole indicator of student achievement, teacher evaluation, and school closing. The backlash to NCLB and RttT reforms and the reliance on high-stakes testing propelled the inception and resilience of the opt-out movement. The purpose of this qualitative dissertation study was to make sense of the reasons parents gave for opting out or opting in their children from the New York State tests in the fourth and fifth grade as there is a racial/ethnic, SES, and regional disparity across Long Island and New York State school districts.

Specifically, this study investigated the flow of information that a group of fourth-and fifth-grade parents received from the school, other parents, social media, and the news media that helped inform their decision to opt out or opt in to the state standardized tests in three Long Island Districts in Nassau County that have a high, a medium, and a low opt-out rate. I
also examined superintendents and principals’ perceptions of the opt-out movement in their respective districts and garnered information about their specific policies and procedures, if any, that are in place for school-to-home communication for testing and opting out.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions help understand the opt-out phenomenon:

1. What does it mean to be a fourth-and fifth-grade parent in a high, medium, or low opt-out district?

2. What are the reasons parents give for opting their child out or opting them in to the New York State tests in high, medium, and low districts?
   a. How do these parents receive their information about the New York State tests and their options to opt their child out of the tests?
   b. According to Christiansen’s (2009) model, how does each of the three district’s opt-out movement correspond to the four stages?

3. How do superintendents and principals in the three Long Island districts make sense of the opt-out rates in their district?
   a. What are the communication procedures for parent social networks between school to home regarding opting out?
   b. What are the policies and procedures for parents who choose to opt their child out of the New York State tests?

4. How do the high opt-out, medium opt-out, and low opt-out district’s communication strategies and responses to parents differ regarding the state tests?
Context of the Study

Long Island consists of two counties that house 125 districts, 656 public schools, 476,000 students, and approximately 36,000 teachers (NYSED, 2018b). Long Island reports opt-out rates that vary in percentage and demographic and, so far, the literature confirms the demographic of higher opt-out rates in more affluent neighborhoods with a higher percentage of White students that come from families that have a higher degree of education. Since this is the case, this study examined three Long Island school districts located in Nassau County that report a high, medium, and low opt-out rate and also report different population demographics.

Within each of the districts, the research was conducted in one elementary school per district (two schools in the high opt-out district), as per the superintendent’s recommendation, with a representative population of 16-20 fourth-and fifth-grade parents. In addition to the parents, superintendents and principals of each district and school were included as part of the data collection to glean as much data as possible about the opt-out movement within each school and within each district. Each district varies not only in opt-out rates but also in population, demographics, annual income, and employment, which helped make sense of the variation of the opt-out rates and make comparisons across different districts in terms of race, SES, and place.

Research Methods and Design

To study the variability among participants and nonparticipants in the opt-out movement, the phenomenon that was examined is making sense of the reasons parents gave for opting out or not opting out their child from New York State tests in fourth and fifth grade. I triangulated the parent interview data by exploring how the superintendents and
principals perceived the opt-out phenomenon within their respective districts. After interviewing each superintendent, I asked him or her which elementary school he or she recommended for my study. Then, I reached out to the principal for consent to conduct the study in their school, interviewed him or her, and then asked them to refer me to fourth-and fifth-grade parents to interview. I used purposive and snowball sampling until I obtained a representative group of parents within each school in terms of race/ethnicity, SES, and percentage of parents that opt out and opt in to the state tests, and until data saturation was reached. I also attended PTA and PTSA meetings in the three districts to obtain more participants. The semi-structured, face-to-face interviews lasted approximately 30-60 minutes with each superintendent, the four elementary school principals (two in one district), and 16-20 parent interviews per school.

**Limitations, Assumptions, and Design Controls**

I utilized a qualitative, phenomenological, multi-case study to delve deeper into the reasons why parents opt out or opt in their child to the tests. However, in doing so, I recognized the limitations of my design and data collection. One limitation of gathering qualitative data was having a sufficient number of participants to draw a rich and expansive description of the phenomenon (Wargo, 2015). To control for this limitation, I set the interviews at 16-20 at each of the four elementary schools. Another limitation was attaining a representative sample of participants. By utilizing an inquiry-based design to explore the perspectives of the participants on the phenomenon of opting out, this study was in-depth but with a limited scope. Lastly, I adjusted my interview protocols to address the new trends in the movement and to continue to be current on any changes in policy and procedure for high-stakes testing that were affected by the timing of my study. For example, during data
collection, the news reported the impending change in the law, awaiting Governor Cuomo’s signature, which tethered test scores to teacher evaluations, which is one of the talking points on the opt-out movement’s agenda.

It is very important to understand that qualitative data collection involves people, and their behaviors, emotions, and personalities are part of the responses collected. Although my goal was to gather individual experiences about the opt-out phenomenon, the outcome is to explore and not confirm, as self-reporting is subjective and has limitations (Madrigal & McClain, 2012). An assumption of the study is that people will speak to me and tell me how they experience and make sense of the opt-out movement. When using self-reporting as a means of data collection, it is an assumption that they will answer in a candid way with sincere interest that is free of their own motives (Wargo, 2015). For example, parents who choose to opt out may say, “I do not support corporate intervention” or those that opt in may say, “Testing is a part of going to school.”

Conclusion

Using a methodically designed qualitative phenomenological, multi-case study, I uncovered the reasons fourth-and fifth-grade Long Island parents gave for choosing to opt out or not opt out their child from the New York State tests. Furthermore, through this study, I gained greater understanding of the communication process and procedures from school to home and parent to parent, as well as the way superintendents and principals make sense of the opt-out movement within their district and school. The findings of this study will augment the theoretical knowledge and understandings of the resistance to the high-stakes testing movement. Specifically, the results of my study on the opt-out movement may provide relevant information and perspectives of deeper understanding for policymakers,
teachers, and schools to make informed decisions about what parents want in schools in regards to testing. When there are high percentages of parents opting out in certain schools versus others, it is hard to know how schools are performing and which students are doing well or not.

The following chapters include a review of the literature, a thorough explanation of the data collection and analysis, a report of the findings as well as their implications and significance, and the appendices utilized for this study. Chapter Two depicts the literature on the opt-out debate, who opts out, and addresses the question of why or why not opt out? Chapter Three details the methodology and the research paradigm used to collect and analyze data for the study that includes a detailed explanation of the selected procedures. Also in Chapter Three is a comprehensive summary of the three districts utilized in the study to give greater understanding of the demographics of each district. Chapter Four reports the primary findings supported by the interview data, and Chapter Five provides a conclusion suggesting implications for theory and practice.
Definition of Key Terms

To avoid any uncertainties and ensure clarity within the dissertation, the following key terms are defined below:

**Corporate reform**: A movement to ‘reform’ public education with a competitive market-based system that is funded by major foundations and other wealthy contributors. The reform system would include public schools, private schools, religious schools, vouchers, and so on, and the schools would compete for customers (students) (Ravitch, 2013).

**Grassroots movement**: A movement started by people at the local level. In this study the opt-out movement on Long Island began with Jeanette Deutermann, a Long Island mother (Deutermann, 2014).

**High-stakes testing**: A test used to make important decisions about students, teachers, schools, and districts based on the test scores is considered high-stakes (Croft et al., 2016).

**Narrowing curriculum**: Programs that discard subjects and special content subjects that are not tested in exchange for more English language arts and mathematics (Nichols & Berliner, 2007).

**Neoliberalism**: “Refers to the radical application of market logic and practices to broader and broader previously nonmarket activities,” such as education (Goldfarb, 2017, para. 4). Neoliberal reforms set up education markets with the goal to privatize public schools (Au, 2016a; Hursh, 2007).
Opt-out movement: A group of parents that support the refusal for their child to take the high-stakes standardized tests in English Language Arts and Mathematics in grades three to eight (Pizmony-Levy & Cosman, 2017).

Opt-out rates: This is the percentage guide I used to define the high, medium, and low opt-out rates for this study (High >50%, Medium 30%-40%, Low <20%).

Resistance: Refusal to take state tests as an act of civil disobedience. Refusal is due to excessive testing that narrows the curriculum, evaluates students, teachers, and schools with a flawed instrument of measurement that is racially biased and fosters a neoliberal agenda (Au, 2015; Brooks, 2018; “Just Say No to Standardized Tests,” 2018).

Social networks: Networks of communication that are set up between parents and between parents and the school. These can be Facebook, Twitter, or any other means of communication.

Test prep: Tutoring, extra help, or classroom time spent practicing concepts that will be on a standardized test. It is a skill and drill process that teaches students test-taking skills in lieu of content of the tested subject (Ravitch, 2010).

Top-down model: A system driven by centralized leadership that may force compliance at the expense of culture (Powell, 2015). In the case of education, this system is the federal government that holds everyone to the same accountability with high-stakes standardized testing at the expense of students, teachers, schools, and the public education system to achieve their agenda and interpretation of school reform through the lens of a corporate model.
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

In this chapter, I reviewed the existing literature on parents’ perceptions of testing and test prep in general and the opt-out movement more specifically. The existing literature can be divided up into the history of the opt-out movement (Bennett, 2016a; Bennett, 2016b; Deutermann, 2014; Hagopian, 2015; Ryan, 2016) and who opts out and why they opt out or not (Au, 2017; Bennett, 2016a; Hildebrand, 2017; Klein, 2016; Murphy, 2017; Phi Delta Kappa and Gallup Poll, 2017; Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky, 2016; Ryan, 2016; Tompson, Benz, & Agiesta, 2013). Gaps in the literature include research on how parents get information about the opt-out movement and their decision-making process of whether to opt their children out of the state standardized tests, as well as the role of districts in disseminating information to parents about the tests, particularly regarding their right to opt out.

The opt-out movement is defined as parents opting their child out of the state standardized tests in grades three to eight. This growing phenomenon to opt out of testing began on Long Island in 2014 in response to the newly constructed Common Core State test and has spread throughout the United States. New York State leads the nation in opt-out rates with 16%, and out of the 50 districts statewide with the highest number of opt outs, 40 of those districts are located on Long Island (Harris, 2015; Hildebrand, 2017; NYSED, 2019). Investigating the literature on the movement yielded a very specific demographic for those that participate in the opt-out movement as highly educated, White families from middle-to upper-income backgrounds (Bennett, 2016b; Klein, 2016; Levy & Edelman, 2016; Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky, 2016; Quinlan, 2016; Ryan, 2016; Wang, 2017).
Proponents of the opt-out debate believe that testing creates anxiety for the students, absorbs valuable teaching time for test prep, takes precedence over other subjects and recess, and is an assault on a free and equitable public school system that fosters deep thinking and humanistic practice and not corporate control that underscores “free market fundamentalism” or neoliberalism (Au, 2015; Rosa, 2015, p. xiv). Tests that are developmentally inappropriate, excessive and pedagogically unsound are the matrix of measure for student achievement, teacher evaluation, and to “defund and privatize public education” (Brooks, 2018; Schroeder, Currin & McCardle, 2018, p. 2; “Tyranny of Testing,” 2018). Reading passages that are two to three grade levels above the grade being tested and contain ambiguous and confusing language are not a valid means of measure (Brooks, 2018).

Education is viewed as a business and the education market as a global competitor. Corporate interventions and sponsored programs support a neoliberal model of education that utilizes political and economic theories and practices (Au, 2016a).

Opponents of the opt-out debate claim that when parents decide to join the opt-out movement, they are violating a child’s civil rights. Test data reveals much more than a student’s performance and/or achievement; the data reveals the inequity of the public school system (Layton, 2015). There is a clear distinction between the scores of low socioeconomic schools with fewer resources allocated and higher socioeconomic schools with an abundance of resources allocated (Wexler, 2014). Test data reported in the newspapers that drive the real estate market clearly delineate the struggling districts from the thriving districts (Harris, 2011).

As part of an effort to lobby Congress, Kati Haycock, president of the Education Trust, supported by civil rights groups, spoke before the Senate education panel and claimed:
Removing the requirements for annual testing would be a devastating step backward, for it is very hard to make sure our education system is serving every child well when we don’t have reliable, comparable achievement data on every child every year (as cited in Layton, 2015, para. 4).

Testing calls the states to task on the issue of inequity among Blacks, Latinx, students with disabilities (SWDs), and English language learners (ELLs) and forces the issue in an effort to change the inequity that is prevalent within these groups within the public school system (Markell, 2017).

A study by Pizmony-Levy and Cosman (2017) surveyed a national sample of adults (2,107) age 18 and older to determine how Americans view the opt-out movement. For those respondents to the open-ended questions on the survey, 35% stated opposition to the opt-out movement for reasons of bad practice to exclude children from the testing because they have to take future mandated tests in high school and college, and the test scores yield data for state progress comparisons. In addition, a sample of 7.5% of the respondents who answered the open-ended questions on the survey criticized the opt-out parents as “helicopter” parents who are overprotective and set a precedent that their child is special and does not have to follow the rules and regulations (Pizmony-Levy & Cosman, 2017). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) affords states the right to conduct assessment audits to eliminate the duplication of tests to reduce the number of administered tests and to move towards fewer, fairer, and better tests that enhance student growth and the education system (Markell, 2017).

There was a need to conduct qualitative research on the opt-out movement on Long Island to make sense of the disproportionate number of students from highly educated White families from middle-to upper-income backgrounds opting out as compared to other
race/ethnicities and socioeconomic status (SES) that may not be educated and come from a lower SES. This dissertation study provides a more in-depth understanding as to how and why some parents opt out of the New York State (NYS) tests. The significance of this study is to learn about the reasons parents give for opting out to help support teachers and schools in the fight against neoliberal education reforms. The findings of this study also assist policymakers interested in designing more effective assessments and accountability systems that monitor individual student growth and help the teaching and learning process as an alternative to using the test scores to evaluate teachers and rate schools based on aggregated student data by schools.

There is also a need to explore how information regarding the opt-out movement is disseminated from various school districts, as well as how social networks of information about the opt-out movement works for different sets of parents. Are parents receiving the information through the school and/or social media, and are they able to access information about opting out? For example, the opt-out movement began exclusively through social media with the Facebook page Long Island Opt-Out Info and continues to recruit its members via social media (Deutermann, 2014). Currently, there are over 24,000 followers on Long Island Opt-out Info that range from teachers, parents, administrators, and so on (“Long Island Opt-Out Info,” n.d.).

Using social movement theory as a lens, I begin the literature review with a definition of the opt-out movement, its inception, and its success. Next is a review of the literature that describes the demographic of those who participate and those who do not participate in the opt-out movement. The next section is an analysis of possible reasons for participation and non-participation in the opt-out movement using social capital theory. The final section is an
analysis of how parents made a decision through the lens of rational choice theory. Due to
the insufficient number of studies on the reasons parents give for opting out their children
from state tests, this study aimed to reveal the issues that influence parents’ decisions to opt
out or opt in to the state testing and to use the information to usher in change as to how test
scores can be used to support student learning, teachers, schools, and generate positive
education reforms.

**Conceptual Framework**

The framework of the study includes social movement theory, social capital theory,
and rational choice theory to provide insight as to how a movement is propelled forward,
who is included and excluded in the movement, and how the decision to participate in the
movement is made. In the first section, I describe Christiansen’s (2009) four-stage model of
social movements to examine the social movement theory and to apply the key components
of the theory to the opt-out movement. The second section utilizes Bourdieu’s social capital
theory (1973, 1984) to understand how parents get information about the opt-out movement.
In the third section, rational choice theory is used to examine how parents make their
decisions and what components are considered in making their decision rational (Abell,

Using these three theories as a lens helped to understand the reasons parents gave for
opting out or not and whether those understandings relate to the opt-out movement in high,
medium, and low opt-out districts. This framework will also be used to uncover some of the
social networks of information that diverse groups of parents on Long Island access to get
information about their right to opt out of the state tests, and the influence it may or may not
have on parents’ decision to participate or not participate in the opt-out movement.
Social Movement Theory

Social movements are defined by certain common characteristics, as a set of beliefs or opinions of individuals within a society who organize against political or social issues as an act of resistance striving to promote or resist change (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Morris, 1981; Turner & Killian, 1987). Social movements occur in “highly charged contexts characterized by mass enthusiasm” (Morris, 1981, p. 445) and require collective action from powerful external actors. The collective action is a joint effort by the actors of the movement for a common goal. The opt-out movement is a grassroots movement started by Jeanette Deutermann, a Long Island mother of two boys, who decided that she “was finished with testing madness” (Deutermann, 2014, p. 196). Through a series of steps, she launched the opt-out movement via social media. The success of a social movement is not only grounded in collective action but is also dependent on whether aggrieved members are able to collectively organize (Taylor, 1999). The Long Island Opt-Out Info Facebook page started in 2015 with a few hundred followers and to date has over 24,000 members (“Long Island Opt-Out Info,” n.d.).

Christiansen (2009) examined the formation of a social movement as a four-stage process of emergence, coalescence, bureaucratization, and decline. In the section below, I apply these four stages to the opt-out movement to analyze the inception, success, and current trends, as well as to set the stage for my dissertation study on fourth-and fifth-grade parents’ reasons for opting out or not.

Stage 1: Emergence

The emergence stage is the preliminary stage for the development of a social movement with little to no organization. The potential members of the movement are
discontent with an issue or a situation and have not taken any action towards a solution. Persons may discuss their dissatisfaction with friends or family, write a letter of concern to outlets such as a newspaper or government representative, but they are still acting as individual agents and not as part of a collective group (Christiansen, 2009). Defined as a grassroots movement, the opt-out movement began as one person with a grievance and gathered momentum as a “significant constituency” developed (Turner & Killian, 1987, p. 231). When looking at the timeline of the opt-out movement led by Jeanette Deutermann, the emergence stage for the movement was when Deutermann started to notice that her usually even tempered and joyful eight-year-old son was now stressed, agitated, and having stomach issues over his third-grade New York State (NYS) tests. Her son voiced, ‘I would rather die than go to school’ (Deutermann, 2014, p. 196).

Due to her concern for her child’s mental and physical health, Deutermann met with her son’s school psychologist, classroom teacher, the principal, and the district superintendent. Her call for action came when she received a notice from the school that her son was a candidate for academic support services three mornings per week to prepare for the tests. It was at that time that Deutermann’s decision was made that she had had enough of the testing and was going to research her options (Deutermann, 2014).

Stage 2: Coalescence

The second stage of a social movement is called coalescence, which is the moment when some grassroots movements may overcome obstacles and press on while others may not. The dismay for the target issue of the movement may be discussed with others but no one did anything to provoke change. For some movements, mobilization does not occur due to a lack of focus, organization, and leadership. However, for movements that mobilize at
this stage, the issue is no longer just a general issue but one that is defined, and the cause identified (Christiansen, 2009). In a grassroots movement, when the discontent exceeds a set threshold, then those who hold the same beliefs collectively devise a plan of action (Sweeney, 1987). At this stage, the movement is organized, has a strategic plan of action, and leadership arises, which is known as the “purposive grassroots model” (Sweeney, 1987, p. 231).

During the coalescence stage of the opt-out movement, Deutermann discussed her situation with her sister, a teacher, and was able to speak with other teachers (Deutermann, 2014). Through meetings with her sister and others, she was made aware of a Facebook group for Upstate New York whose members posted about successfully opting their children out of the NYS tests. She made the decision to opt her son out of the testing, but her conscience would not allow her to just take action for her son. Deutermann made the ethical decision to share her information regarding parental rights about the ability to opt their child out from testing. As Deutermann told her friends about the ability to opt out, some were skeptical and others were interested but not all immediately rushed into making the decision to join her in her boycott (Deutermann, 2014).

**Stage 3: Bureaucratization**

The third stage of the social movement process is the point of formal organization. There is some success in raising awareness, and the movement, at this time, has a more definitive formation. Christiansen (2009) regarded this phase as the time for a shift from casual formation to a more bureaucratic structure for the movement. Without salient public support, movements cease to exist, so recruitment is necessary (Pizmony-Levy & Cosman, 2017). Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olsen (1980) defined general recruitment strategies for
social movements as: soliciting strangers face-to-face in public places, door-to-door canvassing, and posting messages through members’ social networks.

At this stage, the goal is to convert what McCarthy and Zald (1977) termed “adherents,” those that believe in the goals of the movement, to “constituents,” those actively involved and providing resources to the movement (p. 1221). Gitlin (1987) also referred to bystanders as those with no stake in the conflict. In the opt-out movement, there is support from bystanders in the form of those that are not parents and those that are parents but whose children do not attend public school. These bystanders comprised one-fifth of the respondents in a survey conducted by Pizmony-Levy and Green Saraisky (2016) to uncover who is opting out of state tests. With nothing directly at stake, these bystanders feel a connection to the ideals of the movement and lend their support.

Turner and Killian (1987) confirmed that recruitment via social networks is the most efficient of the four recruitment strategies suggested by Snow et al. (1980). As the leader of the opt-out movement, Deutermann set up a Facebook page titled Long Island Opt-Out Info and learned a good deal from Eric Mihelbergel and Chris Cerrone who ran the New York State opt-out group (Deutermann, 2014). In addition to Facebook, Deutermann solicited the help of 90 volunteers to attend board of education meetings, obtain information from district superintendents about the assessments administered within their districts and their opt-out policies, and organize forums for Deutermann and others to speak to community members about education reform. Through this stage, legislators have participated in the opt-out forums and have set up their own forums for spreading the message (Deutermann, 2014).
Stage 4: Decline

Marking the success or failure of a social movement is dependent on a number of variables such as resource availability, accessibility and mobilization of resources, success of tactics, and so on (Gitlin, 1987; Oliver & Marwell, 1992; Sweeney, 1987). Miller (1999) categorized the possible decline of a social movement as repression, co-optation, success, and failure. Although there is a negative connotation to the word decline, it is not necessarily always a negative outcome, as some movements do decline over time. As explained in the next section, Christiansen (2009) identified reasons for decline within mainstream society within Miller’s (1999) framework of repression, co-optation, success, and failure.

Repression is defined by Miller (1999) as the power restricting the movement organizers from performing the functions of the movement and preventing others from joining the movement by pressing criminal charges, harassing members and potential members, using interlopers to invade and disrupt the movement, and so on. The results of repression can play out in a few ways. First, actions by agents of social control can help a movement by members uniting and showing solidarity against the repressive action (Miller, 1999). Another consequence occurs if the repressive action of the social control group against a movement is extreme violence, their actions may lead to more violent collective behaviors by movement members (Turner & Killian, 1987). The show of force and the use of force yield very different outcomes for social movements. For the opt-out movement, do principals or superintendents ever pressure parents to not opt out, or do they show support?

Co-optation is the movement’s reliance on a strong central, charismatic leader. This form of decline transpires when the movement target can convince the movement leader to assimilate to their side by promises of working from within the organization to bring about
change along with a monetary reward (Christiansen, 2009; Miller, 1999). Those that are co-opted will tell their constituents that they are making the change to advance the mission of the movement, but in reality, this will only work if the remaining members of the group are empowered. The loss of a powerful member in a group of powerless constituents will be enough to cause the movement to decline. The opt-out movement continues to gain new followers on the Long Island Opt-Out Info Facebook page at a rate of over 100 new members per month (“Long Island Opt-Out Info,” n.d.). Under the guidance of Jeanette Deutermann and her unyielding dedication to support public schools and to share information about high-stakes testing, teachers’ Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) tied to high-stakes testing, data mining, common core, and opting out, the movement has sustained its members, is growing, and is not in the co-optation stage (“Long Island Opt-Out Info,” n.d.).

**Success** is the ultimate goal for any social movement but is not as simple to achieve. Some social movements decline due to success by achieving their goals. Sustaining a social movement to achieve success is to organize, mobilize, and rejuvenate with new constituents (Miller, 1999). Movements usually subside when they have only one issue and that issue is attained. But few movements are single-minded; most are multidimensional, as some accomplishments lead to the rise of other issues.

Few movements achieve all demands and may be forced to make a compromise regarding some of their issues. To ensure successful compromises, some components of the movement’s goals must be compromised using what Miller (1999) called “absorption” (p. 306). Regarding the opt-out movement, some of the demands are: reduction in time spent on testing and test prepping; no consequences to schools, teachers, and students due to low test scores; and misuse of results for the state receivership program (Pizmony-Levy & Green
Saraisky, 2016). Demands are multifaceted, and compromise may be part of the success of the movement’s goals.

*Failure* is the undesirable end of a movement through lack of strategic action, structural errors, a lack of skill, and luck (Miller, 1999). Miller argued that failure of a movement at the organizational level occurs by way of factionalism and encapsulation. Factionalism is the disagreement about the direction of the movement with a lack of unity and focus. Although a movement may be comprised of multiple factions, they must unite with a common direction and dispel any internal conflicts amongst the members as they arise (Miller, 1999).

Encapsulation, as posited by Miller (1999), is when a movement develops a philosophy that hinders recruitment of new members. Encapsulation occurs when there is a rise of strong internal alliances that prevent new members from joining and a strong internal philosophy that is coherent only to the inside members. The result is often a lack of growth. When a movement cannot grow or expand its constituency, it declines and makes way for other sustainable movements (Miller, 1999). While the framework of social movement theory is the members, leadership, and success or decline of a social movement, social capital theory is the framework of a social community, its members, and how they access the community.

**Social Capital Theory**

While social movements pursue a social or political goal, studies have defined a very specific demographic of parents who take part in opting their child out of state testing as predominantly middle class, White Americans (Bennett, 2016b; Klein, 2016; Levy & Edelman, 2016; Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky, 2016; Quinlan, 2016; Ryan, 2016; Wang,
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2017). The results of a Phi Delta Kappa Gallup Poll (PDK) (2017) national survey concluded that 44% of White parents supported the opt-out movement and 41% opposed it. In contrast, Blacks parents supported the opt-out movement by 28% and 57% were against it. In addition, Latinx were 35% in support of opting out of testing and 45% opposed the movement (Bennett, 2016b). Examining the issue of who supports and opposes the opt-out movement through the lens of Bourdieu’s social capital theory, is key to understanding the reasons fourth-and fifth-grade Long Island parents opt out or not, and where they are getting information about their right to choose to opt out.

Social capital is obtained through the value of cultural codes and practices through experiences such as theater, art, music, and other cultural events, as well as through social networks and connections, and social capital is transmissible from parents to children within a family unit (Bourdieu, 1973, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 2013). Referred to as the “habitus,” this is the most important form of inheritance that directs one to have a sense of how to perceive the social world around them and how they respond as part of daily life. The habitus is not fixed or static and can be restructured according to the contexts, expectancies, and desires of a social setting. Bourdieu refers to a social setting as distinct divisions that he calls “fields” such as education, religion, and law (Blackledge, 2001). Each field has its own rules of engagement, struggles, and forms of social capital.

Through the habitus, the individual “tastes” for refined objects or experiences such as attending the theater, museums, and concerts, and so on, defines the dominant class from the rest of society through a higher form of social capital that is then shared within the family unit (Blackledge, 2001; Bourdieu, 1984; Tzanakis, 2011; Wells & Serna, 2013). Bourdieu (1984) believed that the education system rewarded those who had a social capital that
consisted of valued tastes that discriminated against those who could not mobilize social capital. With the majority of parents taking part in the opt-out movement as predominantly White, middle-class Americans, the focus is on the social capital and the role it plays within the participants and nonparticipants of the opt-out movement. For example, Lareau (1987) conducted a study that examined the social class of families and their relationship with the school through the lens of social capital. Lareau’s main finding was the expectation of the dominant group is for the non-dominant group to adapt to the linguistic norms of the majority group. Lareau found these expectations dissuade the non-dominant group from participation. This relates to this study because parents who do not belong to the dominant group may not be able to access the social capital of the school community and may not receive extensive, if any, information about their right to opt out their child from the NYS tests.

Another study conducted by Delgado-Gaitan (1991) for parent involvement in school for Spanish-speaking families claimed that the institutionalized activities of the school setting are not always considerate of the underrepresented groups within the school. Immigrant parents may not be familiar with the workings of the United States education system and may not understand that they are expected to interact with schools to demonstrate that they want the best for their child’s education (Gibson, 1988). Activities within the school setting that are designed to engage the parents may limit their involvement and ignore the needs of the underrepresented groups, which, in turn, relegate the power back to the school. Although Delgado-Gaitan studied parent involvement, it is through messages from the school and school organizations such as the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) that information, such as the opt-out movement, is disseminated to parents.
Other possible reasons for participation versus nonparticipation may be parental education attainment, working/nonworking, and language acquisition (McCollum, 1996). Lareau (1987) found that the dominant middle-class culture mobilizes parents and creates stronger bonds between home and school. The strong bond between home and school fosters the ability to access the school’s network and forges a strong social network with other parents within the school’s community. In addition, Lareau found that when parents’ social class culture is aligned with the culture of the school, it yields a social profit for the parents in said school. This is not to say that working-class parents and parents of other races and ethnicities are not interested in a home-school relationship.

**Race and Social Capital**

Since social capital is comprised of social relationships, the literature states that race influences one’s capability to access and mobilize social capital (Munn, 2018). For example, Lareau and McNamara Horvat (1999) researched race and social capital in home-to-school relationships. They looked at a district in a small Mid-western town that was comprised of six schools for elementary and junior high, with a total of 1,500 students. The demographics of the 1,500 students were 52% White, 44% Black, 3% Asian, and 1% Latinx. The study showed that the Whiteness of the dominant group was defined as the social capital, so being White was viewed as privileged. The White population had more confident relationships with the school, and they were able to seamlessly construct social and cultural relationships with the school. For the White members of the community, the social networks were strong, which granted the White parents a voice through inclusion into the school community (Lareau & McNamara Horvat, 1999; McNamara Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2013). This research informed my investigation into the opt-out movement.
In contrast, the Black members of the school community viewed the school community through the lens of years of racial discrimination. Lareau and McNamara Horvat (1999) discovered that middle-class Black families were able to manage racial discrimination and activate their social capital in the school community and, through inclusion, maneuvered their way through the school climate. On the other hand, Black parents of low SES were cautious about the school community and their home-to-school communication; they could not manage racial discrimination and chose not to intervene in the school process. Parents isolated themselves from the school community and did not share their concerns with their peers. Their failure to organize caused their exclusion from the school community and from social networks, precipitating a breakdown in the home-school communication. Through the lens of a social class perspective, those of minority cultures in a low socioeconomic class may face exclusion from the school culture and experience a breach in the home-to-school communication (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Delgado-Gaitan’s (1991) research is helpful to show how members of a community access the social capital of a school through the lens of participation in the opt-out movement.

The data in a study of social class and communication between school and parent networks conducted by McNamara Horvat et al. (2013) suggested that parent social networks differ significantly by social class. Parents of children that are socially active through organized activities shape parent social networks. The data showed that in families of all classes, any relationships between parents were significantly formed through their children’s outside activities. It was determined that participation in organized activities for the middle class was an average of 4.9 activities, working class 2.5 activities, and poor families 1.5 activities per year. Considering that children’s activities are a central means of forming and
sustaining parental connections, the differences between the classes show a greater
opportunity for the middle-class parents to establish social networks.

Examining the research conducted by McNamara Horvat et al. (2013) on home
school relationships showed that parents who have the advantage of social networks within
their child’s school community are able to access social capital more easily than those
parents who do not have social networks within their child’s school community. In addition,
Lareau (1987) discovered that parents who viewed teachers and administrators as partners in
their child’s education yielded success in home-school communication, while in contrast,
parents who entrusted the teachers and administrators with the responsibility for their child’s
education yielded unsuccessful outcomes in home-school communications. Social class
played a definitive role in home-school relationships and the creation of social networks.

**Rational Choice Theory**

Rational choice theory posits that individuals, referred to as actors, act rationally and
examine all possible actions before selecting the action that yields the best results (Coleman
& Fararo, 1992). The actors are the micro level and the institutional structure is the macro
level. Rational choice theory, according to Mooney-Marini (1992), can take on the persona of
“purposive action,” and the actors make decisions that yield “beneficial results” (p. 21).
Theories of purposive actions are driven by goals, and they propose that people make
decisions based on their values and beliefs that are developed by making appropriate
connections between the individual actors and the characteristics of social systems (Mooney-
Marini, 1992). Values and beliefs are developed partially through social interactions and
social networks as well as “self-made” (Abell, 1992, p. 188).
Applied to this study, parents are positioned at the micro level and make the decision to opt out or opt in their child to the NYS ELA and math tests based on their relationship with the institutional structure of the school community, the macro level, teamed with their values and beliefs forged over time. On behalf of their child, parents are motivated into actions that yield the greater reward than the cost for the welfare of their child. Armed with information from the macro level, parents are able to make an informed choice that yields a beneficial outcome for their child (Mooney-Marini, 1992).

Rational choice theory assumes that most individuals are “ruled by reason,” discounting other human behaviors such as “impulsiveness, lack of awareness, and loss of control” that may obscure one’s judgment and reduces rationality (Scheff, 1992, p. 102). When individuals act rationally, they create “optimization” by taking into consideration all benefits and costs, and then making a decision that yields optimal results (Coleman & Fararo, 1992, p. xi). Individuals are able to optimize when a situation is transparent, allowing the individual to make a rational informed decision by examining all available options and selecting the one that will yield the best outcomes. When a situation is nontransparent, it creates uncertainty and adds complications to the original situation (Mooney-Marini, 1992).

When parents make their decision to opt out or opt in their child from the NYS testing, not all parents are making an informed decision. Parents who are in districts that are nontransparent with information about the tests and parents’ rights to choose to have their child participate or not are creating uncertainty for the parents and the decision at hand. A lack of transparency may lead parents to conduct their own research and seek information from other parents, teachers, and social networks, as not all information outlets may be
accurate and reliable. There is also the issue of parents who do not speak English and are not able to access resources to enlighten them on the testing issues and options.

Although rational choice theory is often used as an economic framework, many other disciplines have utilized the theory to analyze social phenomena that are derived from social relationships and social structures (Coleman & Fararo, 1992). Parents develop a trust or mistrust for their district through the value placed on the district’s commitment to education. Once trust is formed, the economic transaction is “trust in exchange for benefits” (Münch, 1992, p. 150). The development of trust or mistrust guides one’s response to another’s “advice, action, or lead of that person” (Münch, 1992, p. 151). Individuals foster a relationship of trust or mistrust through their feelings of what is familiar or unfamiliar, and once developed, a cost and benefit ratio is acquired and then considered as part of making a rational choice (Münch, 1992).

As cited by Bennett (2016b), the opt-out movement is predominantly White, middle-class Americans leading by 44% as compared to the 35% Latinx and 28% Black who participate in the opt-out movement. Bennett found the dominant culture in a school district enabled Whites to mobilize their social capital to partake in the movement’s opposition to high-stakes testing. As informed decision-makers, parents are able to make a rational choice that yields the best results for their child. Utilizing the framework of: (a) Christiansen’s four stage model of social movements to examine the social movement theory, (b) Bourdieu’s social capital theory to determine if parents can or cannot access the social capital of their school community, and (c) rational choice theory to analyze how parents make their decision to opt out or opt in their child to the NYS ELA and math tests. The three frameworks were the lenses to understand and apply the key components of the three theories to the opt-out
movement, the participants, and nonparticipants. In the next section, there is a comprehensive portrayal of the literature on the opt-out debate that details those who opt out and opt in.

**Review of the Literature**

A growing reliance on the scores of high-stakes testing has brought the testing debate into the forefront of education and politics. Testing overuse depletes valuable teaching time, narrows the curriculum, and generates the message that failure is imminent in low-income communities at risk of school closure or privatization (“Just Say No to Standardized Tests,” 2018). In 2015, 13 states received letters from the Department of Education for not meeting the required 95% participation rate for state testing (Ujifusa, 2015). Colorado and Connecticut led the others with double digits of 10% or more, but New York State leads the nation in opt-out participants with 19% in 2017, 18% in 2018, and 16% in 2019 (NYSED, 2018c, 2019). Long Island consists of roughly 125 public school districts (“Long Island School Districts,” 2017). Of the total number of opt-out rates in the state, 50 districts statewide had the highest number of opt-outs, and 40 of those districts are located on Long Island (Hildebrand, 2017).

**The Opt-Out Debate**

The opt-out movement is a grassroots movement that encourages parents of students in grades three to eight to refuse to take the New York State tests in English Language Arts (ELA) and in Mathematics (Bennett, 2016a, 2016b). The concept and the action to opt out of high-stakes testing is not new and originated at the national level as United Opt-Out National, at the state level as Opt-Out Washington, and at the local level as Long Island Opt-Out Info (Bennett, 2016a; Hagopian, 2015; Ryan, 2016). Since its inception by Jeanette Deutermann in 2014, Long Island Opt-Out Info has gone viral launched solely on a
Facebook page sporting the title of the movement and the mission as the act of parental rights to protect their children from the anxiety and the ramifications of the New York State tests in grades three to eight (Deutermann, 2014)

One reason for the opt-out movement is to resist the neoliberal agenda in a broad sense. Applied to education, neoliberalism is defined as politically driven corporate reform of education with the goal to privatize the public school system (Reeves, 2018). Neoliberal ideology is the belief that the educational system should be run as a business and parents and students are the consumers. As consumers, families are able to make “market-based” choices based on the results of a standardized curriculum and standardized testing for evaluating students, teachers, and schools (Au, 2016b; Reeves, 2018). The result is that failing schools are forced to close and then be privatized instead of attempting to fix the larger social context of systemic racism, poverty, and inequality (Giroux, 2014). Indeed, the focus of the neoliberal agenda, as stated by Au (2016b), “seeks to transfer public monies to private, profit-making firms through the production and consumption of a bevy of products such as new assessments, textbooks, and classroom materials aligned to assessments” (pp. 316-317).

Billionaire philanthropists such as Bill Gates Jr., the Walton family, and Eli Broad have invested considerable financial resources into neoliberal educational policies, such as the Teach for America teacher credential program and the Common Core State Standards (Au, 2016b). Opting out of standardized testing is one way parents can resist the neoliberal reform movement.

Overreliance on high-stakes testing and test prep is causing schools to focus on the test material and less “imaginative, engaged, and developmentally appropriate learning” (Carlsson-Paige, 2014, p. 86). The increased stress and anxiety on students, teachers, and
schools result in children being unable to sleep, more illness during the testing term, students
disenfranchised with learning, school closures in marginalized neighborhoods, the
termination of teachers and administrators, and so on (Croft et al., 2016). As for
accountability based on test scores, “test-based accountability” (TBA) scores have been
“flat” since 2012 (Ravitch, 2018a). Although there is mounting evidence that TBA is
ineffective, more and more schools are diverting their attention away from social studies,
science, physical education, and the arts to spend more time on the tested subjects of
mathematics and literacy (Au, 2015; Jones, 2014; Ravitch, 2018a).

Another major issue is that testing should be diagnostic and used to inform
instruction, not to punish teachers and students. Test scores are received well after the student
has moved on to another teacher and are not used as formative assessment (Ravitch, 2018a).
With a growing need for innovative thinkers, it is paramount to examine the education
process through the lens of testing and preparation for taking the test (Tanner, 2013).
Teaching to the test or performing extensive test preparation expunges the creativity and
autonomy of the teacher and replaces it with a rigidly scripted curriculum (Cho & Eberhard,
2013).

When debating the topic of narrowing the curriculum, teaching to the test is not the
only consideration. Instead, programs that teach subjects not on the test are being discarded
in exchange for more teachers of English and mathematics, especially in underserved
districts (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Teachers and administrators of lower performing
schools have the daunting task to boost test scores, and the inequality of resource distribution
for impoverished schools makes teaching to the test a viable option to boost scores any way
receive a different education than students in more affluent communities deemed as an
“induced curricular and pedagogic squeeze” due to the focus on raising test scores to close
the achievement gap and avoid school takeover or closure (p. 52). The loss of multicultural
and more culturally relevant curriculums is sacrificed for more test prep.

Low-test scores from low-income students of color are identified as failing and their
teachers and schools are put “under surveillance and an environment of teaching and learning
under constant threat” (Au, 2015, p. 53). The false narrative under the guise of improving the
school system has teachers shouldering the blame instead of the government officials who
ignore the structural inequities of systemic poverty and place their energy on removing
teachers as the solution for student underachievement (Croft et al., 2016). Jones (2014)
suggested that taking the millions spent on private testing companies and spending it on
providing a relaxed, student-centered teaching and learning environment for low-income
schools, like their more affluent counterparts, would be equitable and antiracist.

Each testing season, there are a number of teachers and parents who report students
getting physically sick and emotionally distraught before and during testing (Deutermann,
2014; Frenette, 2015). Students’ emotional, physical, and behavioral reaction was the
catalyst for parents’ response to exercise their right to opt their child out of testing. Students
who view their performance as “personally threatening” (Von Der Embse & Hasson, 2012, p.
181) experience stress and anxiety, especially for the students who score lower on the tests
(Putwain, Connors, Woods, & Nicholson, 2012). A study performed by Segool, Carlson,
Goforth, Von Der Embse, and Barterian (2013) measured test anxiety in 335 students in
grades three to five for high-stakes testing and classroom testing. Segool et al. found more
significant overall test anxiety for high-stakes testing as opposed to classroom testing using
two measures of test anxiety. In addition, the Segool et al. study revealed that teachers reported more student anticipatory anxiety for the high-stakes test and high anxiety for their students taking the high-stakes test as opposed to the classroom test. Teachers who are evaluated by student test scores pass their anxiety on to the students who are taking the test. Test-prep programs that foster support also create anxiety by sending the message that students invited into the program are predetermined to not do well on the tests (Deutermann, 2014; Nichols & Berliner, 2007).

Researchers Heissel, Adam, Doleac, Figlio, and Meer (2018) conducted a study that approached the issue of stress from a physiological perspective. The researchers used a saliva test that measured the cortisol level—the body’s main stress hormone—to determine the stress level of students during high-stakes testing weeks as compared to “regular baseline school weeks” (p. 6). The sample population was pre-adolescent and adolescent volunteers from three schools from a charter school network in New Orleans that were predominantly Black, economically disadvantaged, and from high-poverty neighborhoods. Saliva samples were collected over the course of three weeks during the academic year of 2015-2016, and each sample was collected during a baseline week, low-stakes testing week, and a high-stakes testing week (Heissel et al., 2018). The findings revealed a moderate spike in cortisol levels among students prior to the high-stakes testing, whereas students who had higher cortisol levels, or levels that dipped, performed poorly on the high-stakes test—suggesting that test scores not only reflect student knowledge but also their performance under pressure. Heissel et al. (2018) called their findings “stress bias” (p. 18) and raised the question of the validity of standardized tests as a measure of students’ true ability when there are “stressed testers” (p. 5). The study also suggested that students that live in high crime areas or areas of
poverty are more affected by stress due to the environment in which they live and that carries over into the classroom environment.

Equally important in the study by Heissel et al. (2018), was the question of stress due to test preparation. School districts not making adequate yearly progress have been known to place a substantial amount of time and effort on test preparation to boost their test scores and avoid closure. Heissel et al. (2018) concluded that more research needs to be conducted with different student populations, but their findings posed that “stressed testers will be disadvantaged by admission or graduation policies based on high-stakes tests” (p. 19). This study raised the question of how the scores of high-stakes tests are being used, as well as the validity of the scores.

Furthermore, students are confronted with a test that is developmentally inappropriate and not a valid measure for achievement (Brooks, 2018). The Lexile score for the reading passages are two to three grade levels above the grade of the child being tested, passages are ambiguous, lack urban settings, and are boring (Brooks, 2018; Phillips, 2014). Students as young as eight years old were asked several questions on their test that focused on small details instead of overall comprehension, while other questions required them to read up to four paragraphs to answer which paragraph was connected to the fifth paragraph (Phillips, 2014). As stated by a teacher in “Tyranny of Testing” (2018), “Questions that make students flip back and forth over and over, or force students to compare one paragraph to another, are also not developmentally appropriate” (p. 5).

It is due to the aforementioned concerns that the opt-out movement has garnered significant media attention as well as the curiosity of teachers and school systems. However, the next steps on how to proceed are still split within the United States; people of color, those
of other ethnicities, and those in low-income districts and schools are not seeing high numbers of participation in the opt-out movement. For this demographic, opting out of testing is not a viable option in that it expunges and even skews the data needed to expose the inequities of the education system and for them to attain the needed resources through federal funding to make the necessary improvements to their schools (Harris, 2015; Wang, 2017). Santoro (2018) stated, “information is power” and the test results provide teachers with information about their students’ strengths, weaknesses, and progress as compared to others around the state (para. 1).

Although some may believe that data drives change, Denisha Jones, assistant professor in the school of education at Harvard University and administrator for United Opt-Out agreed with the stance of Black parents who believe data exposes inequities, but Jones stated, “Just because scores help indicate a school is failing its students, doesn’t mean the school will necessarily be injected with new resources” (as cited in Klein, 2016, p. 4). Even acknowledging that the tests are flawed and biased, Black parents believe that their child’s success is contingent on doing well on the tests and want to find the best methods to help their child do well in school, as education is paramount (Klein, 2016). The disparities in the demographic of participants in the opt-out movement mirror the disparities and the inequality of education available to Blacks, Latinx, and low-income families.

Although the term civil rights is used on both sides of the testing debate, in October of 2014, the NAACP, along with eleven other civil rights groups, wrote to President Obama, asking him to reduce the number of tests and offering eight recommendations (Strauss, 2014). Twelve organizations, among them the NAACP, National Urban League, the League of United Latin American Citizens, and the National Council of La Raza, which represented
the Black, Latinx, those with disabilities, and female communities at the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, deemed education a civil rights issue. In January 2015, these organizations changed their stance on high-stakes testing from opposing the testing to writing to Congress and lawmakers to preserve annual testing (Bennett, 2016a; Singer, 2016). The statement issued by the organizations stated that for children of racial/ethnic and socioeconomic groups to receive a fair and equitable education, accurate data must be collected. Definitive test data are needed to expose the achievement gaps to allocate the necessary funding to improve the schools in need (Bennett, 2016a; Quinlan, 2016). Standardized tests safeguard that students of color are not held to a lower standard and the opt-out numbers undermines the reference score for achievement (Klein, 2016; Quinlan, 2016).

However, the names of some organizations that claim “testing is a civil right” appear on the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s grant list. At a press conference for the Smarter Balance Assessment Consortium at the NAACP Seattle chapter, Jesses Hagopian, a Seattle history teacher and opt-out proponent, stated that the Gates Foundation has “poured hundreds of millions of dollars into the most radical education change in US history: the Common Core State Standards and high-stakes standardized tests that came shrink-wrapped with those standards” (“Talkingsticktv,” 2015). Hagopian claimed that Gates is using his fortune to undermine public schools, although he does not possess any experience with the public school system. Furthermore, Gates sends his children to the Lakeside private school in Seattle, where they do not use the Common Core State Standards to guide their curriculum; Hagopian went on to say, “What’s good enough for his kids is good enough for ours” (“Talkingsticktv,” 2015). Organizations such as UnidosUS formerly National Council of La
Raza took funds from the Gates Foundation in 2017, the Leadership Conference Education Fund in 2018, Children Defense Fund in 2013, National Urban League in 2016, and so on, which may be the unconfirmed reason for the change of direction (“Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation,” 2019).

In 2018, the NAACP changed their position once again from pro-high-stakes testing for data to their original position of opposing high-stakes testing. A brief issued by the NAACP supported legislation that requires high-stakes decisions to be based on the following: “Multiple measures of student performance and, when standardized tests are used by schools and school districts, that the tests be valid and reliable, measure what the student was taught and provide appropriate accommodations for disabled children” (Singer, 2018). The brief went on to oppose the use of a single standardized test to measure academic achievement. In response to the brief, Ravitch (2018b) wrote:

I encourage the NAACP to delve further into the misuse of standardized testing, which is scored on a normal curve and should never [bold in the original] be used to make high-stakes decisions about promotion or high school graduation, not even as part of multiple measures.

The term “multiple measures” is controversial and is interpreted as other standardized tests that promotes over testing. Ravitch’s point is that standardized testing should not be part of the multiple measures. This brief states guidelines for testing but does not directly address over testing or abolishing high-stakes testing.

With the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002, all children are included in testing. This sparked the inception for the Adequate Yearly Progress requirement of 95% participation in standardized tests to ensure that schools were successfully educating all of
their students ("Adequate Yearly Progress," 1999). Prior to the passage of NCLB, children in underserved schools were either sent home or to another classroom to conceal the seriousness of their needs while others took the test (Klein, 2016; McNeill, 2000). It is the act of standing up for equity for all that drives those to not participate in the opt-out movement.

Others opposed to the opt-out movement are from areas such as Buffalo, New York, where 68% of the students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (O’Brien, 2018); they believe that the state tests reduce inequalities within their districts as a means to ensure a high-quality and equitable education (Santoro, 2018; “WKBW Staff,” 2018). A 2018 survey on New York Attitudes on Standards and Assessments found that 60% of parents supported annual assessments to measure student progress versus 22% opposed and 17% not sure (“High Achievement New York,” 2018).

Parents who are opposed to opting out are from high-income districts as well. There are parents who have children in middle-class public schools who believe that “tests push students to meet higher standards” and opting out sends the message that you can opt out of other tests down the road (Marshall, 2016, para. 7). Some parents said that they believe opting out is like coddling their child, setting them up for future psychological issues with anxiety, and that it is misguided to avoid the things they fear (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; Rosenfeld, 2016). Other parents look at their child’s scores as another piece to the arsenal that is needed in their child’s education (Marshall, 2016). Furthermore, some parents view the scores as a way to measure the quality of education their child is receiving in school.

The opt-out movement began as a resistance to testing itself. Those that are activists of the movement have specific target issues and are spreading their message through social media. There is a disparity in the demographics of the participants and the non-participants in
the opt-out movement; a survey by Pizmony-Levy and Cosman (2017) identified some possible causes as the general public’s reliance on traditional media and the general public’s misconception of the motivation of the movement. The misalignment of media and mission may be contributors to the disparity in the demographic of participants in the movement and the number of those that are not represented. Although there is support of the demographic of the participants in the opt-out movement, the literature is limited on the non-participants and how and why this is happening.

Who Opt Out?

Since the inception of the opt-out movement in 2014, New York State leads the total in those who have refused to take New York State tests in grades three to eight. The majority of participants in the movement tend to have characteristics as being White, middle to relatively affluent socioeconomic status, suburban, and highly educated (Bennett, 2016b; Klein, 2016; Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky, 2016; Ryan, 2016). The disparity in the participants is reflected in the scores on the Phi Delta Kappa and Gallup Poll (2017); participants’ confidence in measuring interpersonal skills with standardized tests yielded 32% confidence for Whites, 54% for Blacks, and 60% for Latinx. Less than half of the survey’s White participants have confidence in the measurement capabilities of standardized tests with a difference of 22% for Blacks and 28% for Latinx. In a survey funded by the Joyce Foundation, the Associated press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, Tompson et al. (2013) surveyed 1,025 parents or guardians of children who completed a grade between kindergarten to 12th during the 2012-2013 academic years. They found that 42% of Latinx parents and 36% of Black parents believe positively that standardized tests measure their
child’s performance and the quality of their education while 12% of White parents share their views.

The national totals in the PDK and Gallup Poll (2017) for the category of extremely to very important items in school quality, ranked standardized testing at the bottom of the list with 42%, interpersonal skills at 82%, and technology and engineering classes also 82%. In addition, the survey revealed that only 6% of the participants in the PDK and Gallup Poll viewed standardized test performance as the most important factor in school quality. In this category, differences among ethnic groups and SES support the literature for describing the demographic of the participants in the opt-out movement. Pizmony-Levy and Green Saraisky (2016) stated, “research to date has found that opting out is more likely among Whites and economically advantaged families” (p. 9).

In the PDK and Gallup Poll (2017), when asked of the importance of standardized testing and interpersonal skills, the disproportion with national totals remained with Whites 33% importance of testing and 80% interpersonal skills, Blacks 59% testing and 80% interpersonal skills, and Latinx 61% testing and 89% interpersonal skills. The data clearly indicate that among the three racial/ethnic categories, all are supportive of interpersonal skills with a distinct difference in importance of testing with Blacks 26% and Latinx 28% higher as opposed to White participants. The White participants lead with a 47% gap in support of the importance of interpersonal skills versus the importance of testing.

Another component of the demographic of those who participate in the opt-out movement is their SES. The national results for those with an annual household income of less than $50K was 50% importance of testing and 80% interpersonal skills, income of $50K-$100K thousand was 37% testing and 87% interpersonal skills, and those earning over
$100K was 27% testing and 78% interpersonal skills (PDK & Gallup Poll, 2017). The results of the 2017 poll substantiate the discrepancy between those with a higher SES supporting and participating in the opt-out movement as opposed to other ethnicities and those with a lower SES. Phi Delta Kappa and Gallup Poll findings are consistent with the survey by Tompson et al. (2013) who found 85% for support of testing for an annual income less than $50K, 73% for earnings of $50-$100K, and 63% for income over $100K.

In addition, the major participants in the opt-out movement are likely to be educated, with 26% support for testing for college graduates and 46% support for testing for non-graduates (PDK & Gallup Poll, 2017). The Tompson et al. (2013) survey showed 63% college graduates, 80% some college or technical school, and 90% with less than a high school diploma for attitudes toward the support of testing. The issue of testing and the non-supporters have maintained a steady trend over the past four years as those in the middle to upper quadrant of the economic scale and are educated above a high school diploma.

The demographics vary across counties in New York State, and the poll does not show the data for the various counties throughout New York State to make sense of the opt-out movement and its participants by region. For example, data on the opt-out participants in Monroe County, an upstate region, yields a much different picture than the results for a Long Island district, a downstate region. Monroe County houses several districts with populations of students with disabilities (SWDs) and poor students (Murphy, 2017). In 2017, 14 out of 18 districts in Monroe had opt-out rates for SWDs at approximately five percentage points higher than the overall student body (Murphy, 2017). Another variable to consider is students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Chingos (2015) concluded that within the analyzed data collected of 648 districts within New York State and students who are eligible
for free or reduced-price lunch programs, disadvantaged students tend to be in districts with a low rate of opt-out participation.

On Long Island, the highest concentration of opt-outs was in Suffolk County, with over 50,000 students in mostly White, middle-class districts who refused to take the tests in 2019 (Tyrrell & Ebert, 2019). Suffolk continues to lead the number of opt-outs in 2019 with 47% to Nassau County’s 39% (“Projects: ELA and Math Opt-Outs 2016-2019,” 2019). Each district on Long Island has its own specific demographic. For example, one affluent, predominantly White district ranked as one of Long Island’s best districts, had a 2019 opt-out rate of 63%. In contrast, another Long Island district with a majority of Black and low SES families had an opt-out rate in 2019 of 12% (“Projects: ELA and Math Opt-Outs 2016-2019,” 2019). In 2019, the opt-out rates have dropped on Long Island in both Nassau and Suffolk County in the top 25 school districts in both counties, but Long Island still maintained a range of 59% to 80% opt-out rates for their top 25 opt-out districts (“Projects: ELA and Math Opt-Outs 2016-2019,” 2019).

**Why or Why Not Opt Out?**

The opt-out movement has bred a robust resistance toward high-stakes standardized tests in New York State. Knowing who participates and who do not participate, precipitates the demographic questions: Why do they opt out or not opt out their child from the New York State tests? How do parents receive their information about the New York State tests and their options to opt their child out of tests?

The ramifications of opting out of testing may not be as detrimental to those that hold characteristics of privilege. Parents who participate in the opt-out movement have resources to make decisions about their child’s education because of their SES and their education.
Parents who opt out their child can possibly afford to place their child in private school if consequences are lodged against their actions, they may receive school-supported tutoring, and they may be equipped to advocate for their child (Bennett, 2016b). On the contrary, students of color in underserved schools are losing effective teaching and learning due to standardized tests. Systemic racism and inequality is prevalent as the majority of the participants aforementioned are White, suburban middle to affluent SES, and educated parents. Parents in position of privilege may not face the same issues and challenges as Blacks, Latinx, and those in underserved schools, and the opt-out movement may underscore a racist and classist inequity (Au, 2017).

Long Island Opt-Out Info, launched and sustained through social media, is a Facebook group that has grown over the span of three years with over 24,000 followers to date (“Long Island Opt-Out Info,” n.d.). Social media is the vehicle used to drive the movement. Reliance on social media limits the availability of recruitment, as not all members of a community have access to technology (Kang, 2016; Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky, 2016; Rogers, 2016). The inequitable access to technology is not determined solely by Internet access but instead is defined by access to all Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) such as wireless networks and cellphones. Also, the lack of access to broadband stifles the connection to media that all socioeconomic representations use, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram (“Digital Divide,” 2017).

This digital divide is the gap between those that have access and those that do not have access to ICTs and broadband. This is just one aspect of the inequity in technology (Anderson, 2017; Subramony, 2014). The inequity of the divide can also be defined as including antiquated computers, poor connections, high-price narrow band or dial-up
connections, and access to technical support (“Digital Divide,” 2017). Ten percent of Americans lack access to high-speed Internet for reasons of availability or cost (Kang, 2016). Americans with annual earnings of $30K or less are 27% less likely to have broadband in their home than those earning $30K-$100K and 41% lower than those earning above $100K (Anderson, 2017).

Inequitable access to the Internet for low-income areas is a disadvantage, as technology empowers its users to attain knowledge through consumption, everyday use, production, and specific skills needed to create new online content (Rogers, 2016). Although many people have smartphones, these devices are not capable of doing everything. There are approximately 7.8 million low-income users and 48% of them either lose their coverage for lack of payment or terminate the coverage due to high cost (Kang, 2016). There is little to no incentive for carriers to go into low-income areas. Technology transforms society by providing equal opportunities by means including learning, career building, safety, and connections to social communities. Those that do not have access to broadband Internet services may be missing out on opportunities as most businesses, schools, and including some social welfare services, send important messages online.

Since its inception, the opt-out phenomenon has elicited a wide range of discourse. For White, middle-to high-income, suburban, educated parents, they may opt out at high rates because privilege and opportunity underscores the on-going support in refusing to take the tests with little to no repercussions; their child will be promoted regardless of their participation in the movement. On the other hand, Black, Latinx, and low SES families may opt out at lower rates because they are interested in promoting opportunity to advance upward not only from grade to grade but also in the future.
To date, there is a lack of a uniform body of literature on this topic. More research is needed to unearth the reasons as to why families on Long Island choose to opt their child out of the tests or not in high, medium, and low opt-out districts. More research is also needed to understand how the opt-out message is disseminated to the families across the three types of opt-out districts identified in this study. This study fills the gap in the literature that has defined the demographics of the participants and nonparticipants in the opt-out movement and explains why parents participate or do not opt out their child from the New York State tests in grades three to eight.

In the final analysis, it is paramount that all stakeholders are included in the discussions regarding testing and that they all have the same voice within the process. The opt-out movement aims to marshal power into policy through a copious agenda to expunge testing and resisting a corporate agenda of education reform. Large refusal rates on Long Island sustain the opt-out agenda, with New York having the highest percentage of opt outs over the past four years. This study aimed at understanding the opt-out phenomenon and why opt-out rates vary in three districts in Nassau County. All the studies to date have not qualitatively explored the opt-out phenomenon. This study contributes to the literature in that respect.
CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

This chapter describes the research methods I utilized to conduct my qualitative dissertation study in three Long Island school districts with a high, medium, and low opt-out rate. To make sense of the opt-out movement from its inception, success, and current trends, I used the theoretical framework of Christiansen’s (2009) four-stage model of social movements: emergence, coalescence, bureaucratization, and decline. The opt-out movement on Long Island began in 2014 by a parent named Jeanette Deutermann, who decided that testing was causing more harm to students and should not determine teacher evaluation ratings. Deutermann argued that test prep narrows the curriculum and takes up valuable teaching time and in general opposed the corporatization and privatization of education through neoliberal reforms (Deutermann, 2014; Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky, 2016).

Another framework I utilized was Bourdieu’s (1973, 1984) social capital theory to make sense of how the information about parents’ right to opt out of the state tests gets communicated and whether there is a difference among parent demographic groups across and within the three selected school districts. Parents who are not able to access the social capital of the school community or do not have knowledge of or access to social media sites about important school issues are at a disadvantage and may be excluded from the school community (Lareau & McNamara Horvat, 1999; McNamara Horvat et al., 2013), which is also the case with the opt-out movement. Bourdieu’s social capital theory is paramount to understanding how Long Island parents in school districts with high, medium, and low opt-out rates are getting their information about their right to opt out.
The third theory utilized in this study was rational choice theory to examine the components parents consider when making their decision to opt out or opt in their child to the NYS tests (Abell, 1992; Coleman & Fararo, 1992; Mooney-Marini, 1992; Münch, 1992; Scheff, 1992). Information about the opt-out movement, the tests, and parents’ right to opt out their child is one of the considerations for making a rational choice. In addition, making a rational choice takes into account parents’ values and beliefs—in this case, about education and their goals for their child’s education attained through social interactions and from the school community.

While much is known about who opts out (Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky, 2016), less is known about why parents choose to participate, or not, in the opt-out movement. The purpose of this qualitative study was to make sense of the reasons parents gave for opting out or not opting their children out of the New York State tests in the fourth and fifth grade. This dissertation study investigated the flow of information that a group of fourth-and fifth-grade parents received from the school, other parents, social media, and the news media in three Long Island districts in Nassau County that have a high, medium, and low opt-out rate. I also examined superintendents’ and principals’ perceptions of the opt-out movement in their respective districts. My dissertation study answered the following research questions:

1. What does it mean to be a fourth-and fifth-grade parent in a high, medium, or low opt-out district?

2. What are the reasons parents give for opting their child out or opting them in to the New York State tests in high, medium, and low districts?

   a. How do these parents receive their information about the New York State tests and their options to opt their child out of the tests?
b. According to Christiansen’s (2009) model, how does each of the three district’s opt-out movement correspond to the four stages?

3. How do superintendents and principals in the three Long Island districts make sense of the opt-out rates in their district?
   a. What are the communication procedures for parent social networks between school to home regarding opting out?
   b. What are the policies and procedures for parents who choose to opt their child out of the New York State tests?

4. How do the high opt-out, medium opt-out, and low opt-out district’s communication strategies and responses to parents differ regarding the state tests?

In the following sections of this chapter, I discuss the procedures I used to conduct my dissertation study through the worldview of social constructivism using qualitative methods. The individual components of my study are: research paradigm, role of the researcher, participants and setting, data collection and analysis, validation, and limitations of the study.

The significance of this study was to learn the reasons parents gave for opting out of state tests and to fill the gap in the literature with a qualitative perspective. In addition, interviewing parents in three districts (a high, a medium, and a low opt-out rate with varying demographics and SES) gave an equal voice to all participants. This study aimed to make sense as to why there is a racial/ethnic and SES disparity in the participants and nonparticipants of the opt-out movement across Long Island. The current data are quantitative and includes parents and nonparents, while the participants in this study are
telling their story through their experiences with decision making to opt out or opt in their child into the NYS tests in ELA and math.

Another contribution from the findings of this study is to restructure the current system so that it makes learning equal across race/ethnicity and SES instead of using high-stakes testing with retributive consequences for students, teachers, administrators, and schools in low-performing and low SES neighborhoods. Currently, under the guise of raising test scores, money allocated to underperforming schools is being spent on purchasing test preparatory materials from for-profit corporations. In addition, this study can inform policymakers concerned with crafting a learning system that assesses and monitors individual growth while fostering engaging and innovative teaching instead of using test scores of young children to evaluate teachers and rate schools.

**Research Paradigm**

I conducted my phenomenological multi-case dissertation study with a purposive sample of three suburban school districts with a high, medium, and low opt-out rate. For phenomenological studies, Creswell (1998) recommends five to twenty-five participants. This study included 15-20 parents from each district and contextualized their experience with the superintendent and principals from each district and school \( n = 59 \). According to Smith (1997), hermeneutic phenomenology is a “research methodology aimed at producing rich textual descriptions of the experiencing of selected phenomena in the life world of individuals that are able to connect with the experience of all of us collectively” (p. 80). As a multi-case study, I conducted my data collection in one elementary school each for the Butler and Culvert School districts, and two elementary schools in the Ashbury School district due to a lack of participants, which totaled four schools. Case studies are appropriate for this
study because they provide detailed insight into the lived realities of individuals in a specific time and place (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). The focus of my study was to examine the perceptions of parents, superintendents, and principals regarding the opt-out movement in the selected schools, as each district is unique in demographics and opt-out rates.

The methodology for my data collection is an inquiry-based research design with a constructivist worldview. By utilizing the constructivist lens, I gathered my data through personal contact with parents, superintendents, and principals in their normal setting, with a focus on the “complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 8). I utilized the qualitative interview method to create understanding that does not manipulate variables or test a hypothesis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The research design afforded me the opportunity to explore deeper meanings from the parents’ perspectives as well as the superintendents’ and principals’ perspectives with a clarity of purpose as to why some parents participate and others do not participate in the opt-out movement. This allowed listening to the data that talk in different ways (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I selected the methodology of interviews to better understand the phenomenon of the opt-out movement in a real-life setting (Golafshani, 2003).

Most of the literature about the demographics of the opt-out movement was gleaned through surveys (Pizmony-Levy & Cosman, 2017; Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky, 2016). Indeed, there is a lack of empirical research regarding how and why there is a specific demographic who is more likely to participate in the opt-out movement—namely White, middle-class parents. The phenomenological design is appropriate to fill the gap in the literature because I sought to understand and make sense of the essence of the opt-out movement by asking people about their lived experiences. As the researcher, I accurately
describe the phenomenon of the opt-out movement by remaining true to the facts that are gleaned from the interviews (Groenewald, 2004). Giorgi, Giorgi, and Morley (2017) posited that the first step in phenomenological research is to describe the phenomenon that is being analyzed. The goal of my study was to make meaning of this phenomenon and to make sense of how and why parents are opting out or not opting their children out of state tests.

Through my systematic research design, I unearthed themes that add to the understanding of parent’s perspectives of the opt-out movement. Parents are the linchpins of the movement. My objective was to understand the context in which parents construct their world and make meaning of the opt-out movement, its agenda, and how that agenda affects their child, as they make the decision to participate or not participate in opting their child out of the test (Merriam, 2009). I also interviewed the superintendents of the three districts and the principals of the four schools to gain insight on their perspective toward the opt-out movement within their district and school, respectively, and how they made sense of the opt-out rates. In this way, I not only have the perspectives of the parents, but I also accessed the philosophies of the school leaders and how they interpret the opt-out movement and what role they played in encouraging or discouraging the option to opt out of testing. The phenomenological approach for my dissertation study provided valuable insight from those who experienced the opt-out movement in their everyday environment and to construct knowledge by becoming a part of the world in which they interpret and construct meaning and understanding of the opt-out movement (Merriam, 2009).

**Role of the Researcher**

A principle underpinning of my role in this study is my teaching experience and unique perspective toward the NYS ELA test. I was an ELA teacher for 12 years in a
Catholic school in an urban neighborhood, and I administered and graded the sixth-and eighth-grade tests. I have also participated in the Forms Construction (committee for test form validity) and Final Eyes (final editing committee) for the seventh-grade ELA test for Questar, the writers of the tests. During my time as an ELA teacher, I did not have any experience with the opt-out movement, nor was my job in jeopardy based on my students’ performance on the test; I was completely removed from any repercussions, unlike public school teachers.

As an educator and a parent, I was comfortable interviewing administrators and parents, as I conducted multiple parent meetings and worked closely with the administrators to obtain permission and to gather parent participation for this study. Because of my prior experience, I was able to create a professional yet comfortable environment for my participants to speak freely without judgment and fear of any ramifications. I used a semi-structured interview process that enabled the participants to engage in a “conversation with a purpose” (Burgess, 1984, p. 42) that focused on the phenomenon of the opt-out movement and allowed for adjustments in the questioning protocol as deemed necessary (see Appendix B and E).

My research on the opt-out movement in a high, medium, and low district answered why there is such a huge disparity in opt-out rates that range from as low as 10% in low-SES districts and to as high as 79% in high-SES districts (Harris, 2015: “Projects: ELA and Math Opt-Outs 2016-2019,” 2019). To answer that inquiry, this qualitative phenomenological multi-case study focused on district leadership (superintendents and principals) and the parents who are the key actors of the movement, who, in most cases, make the decision to either opt out or opt in their child to the tests.
Site Selection

For the context of this dissertation study, the setting is salient both theoretically and conceptually since Long Island accounts for some of the highest opt-out rates in the state. The racial/ethnic demographic contrast among the suburban districts teamed with the opt-out rates per district perpetuated the question of how and why a particular demographic chose to participate or not in the opt-out movement.

For this study, I selected three districts that report a high, medium, and low opt-out rate for NYS testing. I focused on fourth- and fifth-grade parents because the literature supports that the percentage of fourth-grade opt outs is the mean percentage for grades three to eight (Schrafel, 2015), and at the time of my study (fall 2018), third-grade parents have not had the chance yet to opt their children out of the tests.

As noted in Table 1, the opt-out rate for the Ashbury School District is greater than 50%, the Butler district is 30-40%, and the Culvert district is less than 20% (“Projects: ELA and Math Opt-Outs 2016-19,” 2019). The Ashbury district, Butler district, and Culvert district, as noted in Table 1, vary in student demographics. The Ashbury district is predominantly White with a small population of Black and Latinx students. The Butler district has a diverse population with a mix of Latinx, Black, and White students, and the Culvert district is mostly Latinx and Black. Another notable piece of data is the percentage of economically disadvantaged students with Ashbury at 10-15%, Butler at 45-50%, and Culvert at 65-70% (NCES, 2015). The district demographics in Table 1 and the opt-out rates supported the literature that defined the opt-out participants as White families from middle-to upper-income backgrounds (Bennett, 2016b; Klein, 2016; Levy & Edelman, 2016; Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky, 2016; Quinlan, 2016; Ryan, 2016; Wang, 2017). This study pursued
meaning from the data and interviews to understand the reasons parents gave for opting out or not opting out of state tests.

Table 1

*District Demographics for Three Long Island School Districts*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ashbury SD</th>
<th>Butler SD</th>
<th>Culvert SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opt-Out 2018 ELA &amp; Math</td>
<td>&gt;50%</td>
<td>30-40%</td>
<td>&lt;20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Population</td>
<td>3,570</td>
<td>1,890</td>
<td>3,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Predominately White</td>
<td>Most Prevalent Latinx</td>
<td>Majority Latinx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELL Students</td>
<td>1-5%</td>
<td>5-10%</td>
<td>25-30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>10-15%</td>
<td>15-20%</td>
<td>10-15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>10-15%</td>
<td>45-50%</td>
<td>65-70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Demographical data for Table 1 from New York State Education Department [https://data.nysed.gov](https://data.nysed.gov)


Percentages presented in a range to ensure confidentiality.

Research found that students in White, affluent suburban school districts, similar to the demographics of Ashbury, tend to do better on the tests because of SES and racial/SES isolation (Au, 2017). This claim is supported in Table 2 with the aggregated level of proficiency in ELA and math per district. Ashbury led the three districts in ELA and math proficiency as compared to the proficiency levels in Butler and Culvert. In addition, Ashbury led by a wider margin with a 45% range in ELA and math proficiency as compared to Culvert (NYSED, 2018c).
Furthermore, in Table 3 and Table 4, scores reported by levels are as follow: level 1 is below proficient in standards for grade level, level 2 is partially proficient, level 3 is proficient, and level 4 excels in the standards for grade level. The data by score level showed Culvert had the highest percentage, 30-35% in ELA and 40-45% in math, of students scoring at level 1, and Ashbury had the lowest percentage at 5-10%, for both ELA and math for students scoring at level 1. As noted in Table 3 and Table 4, Butler and Culvert have a comparable range of proficiency at level 2 in ELA and math, as compared to Ashbury with a 15% lower number of students scoring a level 2 in ELA and math. For proficiency level 3, the percentage range for ELA and math is a 10% difference between the Ashbury and Butler districts and a 15% range between Ashbury and Culvert, with Ashbury totaling more students that scored a level 3 (NYSED, 2018c).

Table 3

District Level of Proficiency in English Language Arts, 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Level 1</th>
<th>Level 2</th>
<th>Level 3</th>
<th>Level 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ashbury SD</td>
<td>5-10%</td>
<td>15-20%</td>
<td>35-40%</td>
<td>30-35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butler SD</td>
<td>25-30%</td>
<td>30-35%</td>
<td>25-30%</td>
<td>10-15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culvert SD</td>
<td>30-35%</td>
<td>30-35%</td>
<td>20-25%</td>
<td>5-10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note Data for Table 2 from New York State Education Department https://data.nysed.gov
Percentages presented in a range to ensure confidentiality.
Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Level 1</th>
<th>Level 2</th>
<th>Level 3</th>
<th>Level 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ashbury SD</td>
<td>5-10%</td>
<td>15-20%</td>
<td>35-40%</td>
<td>35-40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butler SD</td>
<td>30-35%</td>
<td>25-30%</td>
<td>25-30%</td>
<td>15-20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culvert SD</td>
<td>40-45%</td>
<td>30-35%</td>
<td>15-20%</td>
<td>5-10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note* Data for Table 2 from New York State Education Department [https://data.nysed.gov](https://data.nysed.gov)
Percentages presented in a range to ensure confidentiality.

The data for demographics, opt-out percentages, and proficiency levels showed that the Ashbury district had a significant number of students who scored a level 3 and a level 4 for ELA and math as compared to the Butler district and the Culvert district. In contrast, Culvert had a significant number of students who scored a level 1 and a lower rate of proficiency in level 4. As noted in Table 1 for district ethnicity, SES, and English language learners, there is a significant difference between the Ashbury district and the Culvert district in demographics and proficiency that supports the literature that students in schools that are predominately White, receive a different education (Au, 2015). Students in affluent districts typically have access to more resources and tend to be exposed to more critical thinking and problem-solving lessons. On the other hand, students in low-income districts have fewer resources and are often exposed to skill and drill test prep to generate higher test scores (Condron, 2011). These issues of inequality in low-income versus high-income districts will be further examined and supported with data in Chapter Four.

**Ashbury School District.** Looking at the demographical data per district helps to understand the needs and strengths of each district. Ashbury is a large school district with five elementary schools, grades kindergarten to five; one middle school, grades six to eight; and one high school, grades nine to twelve. The total district population is approximately 3,570 students, with 8% of those students in the fourth grade and 7% in the fifth grade.
Expenditures per pupil are $29,900 (NYSED, 2016), 11% of those students are eligible for free lunch, and 1.5% are eligible for reduced-price lunch (NCES, 2018). The average class size is 20 students per class (NYSED, 2018a), and the Ashbury district reports a 99% high school graduation rate (NYSED, 2018a). The residents of Ashbury have a median household income of $105,500 (2.57% growth), and 5.6% of the residents live below the poverty line, which is lower than the national average of 13.4% (NCES, 2018). 

Employment by industry for the residents of Ashbury showed the highest percentage in healthcare and social assistance and educational services (“Data USA,” 2017).

**Butler School District.** Of the three districts in this study, Butler has the lowest population. The Butler district has three elementary schools, grades kindergarten to six; a middle school, grades seven and eight; and a high school, grades nine to twelve. The total district population is approximately 1,890, and 8% of those students are in the fourth grade and 7% are in the fifth grade (NCES, 2018). Expenditures per pupil are $26,860 (NYSED, 2016), 38% of the population are eligible for free lunch, and 6.5% are eligible for reduced-price lunch, which is higher than the rate for the Ashbury district (NCES, 2018). The average class size in the Butler district is 21 students per class (NYSED, 2016), and Butler reports a 90% high school graduation rate (NCES, 2018). The residents of Butler have a median household income of $108,000 (8.25% growth), which is higher than Ashbury, and 5.8% of the residents live below the poverty line, which is comparable to Ashbury and lower than the national average of 13.4% (NCES, 2018). The highest rate of employment by industry for the residence of Butler is in health care and social assistance, which is also the highest rate of employment by industry for Ashbury. Educational services ranked second in Butler as compared to Ashbury (“Data USA,” 2017).
Culvert School District. The population of the Culvert School District is the second largest district of the three within the study, with three elementary schools that house grades prekindergarten to grade six; one middle school, grades seven and eight; and one high school, grades nine to twelve. The total district population is approximately 3,300 with 8% of those students in the fourth grade and 8% are in the fifth grade (NCES, 2018). Expenditures per pupil are $25,290, which is lower than the Ashbury and Butler districts (NYSED, 2016). Out of the district population, 41.5% are eligible for free lunch and 4.8% are eligible for reduced-price lunch, which is higher than the Ashbury and Butler districts (NCES, 2018). The average class size is 23 students per class (NYSED, 2016), with a 65% high school graduation rate—also lower than the Ashbury and Butler districts (NCES, 2018). The residents of Culvert have a median household income rate of $78,100 (6.67% growth), lower than both Ashbury and Butler but higher than the median income of the United States at $60,336 (NCES, 2018). Eleven percent of the residents of Culvert live below the poverty line, which is also higher than the Ashbury and Butler residents but lower than the national average of 13.74% (NCES, 2018). The highest rate of employment by industry for Culvert residences, like Ashbury and Butler, is in health care and social assistance, while waste management ranks second (“Data USA,” 2017).

Data Collection

After I performed a comparative analysis of the demographics for each district with a high, medium, and low opt-out rate, I began my fieldwork. The data collection began in September 2018 with the superintendents and ended in March 2019 with the parents. Once the data collection process began, it continued simultaneously among the three districts. To stay organized, I set up three separate interview inventory spreadsheets to track participant
names, assigned pseudonyms, opt-out or opt-in decision, the length of the interview, race/ethnicity (self-reported by participants), date of interview, the recommender, when transcribed, and when coded. Performing background research enabled me to have a clear understanding of each district by opt-out rates, demographics, and test scores as empirical information before conducting my dissertation study. Gathering other data through documents offers one more method for collecting information and pushing aside bias to ensure validity of the study.

**Interview/Superintendents.** My first step was to obtain permission from the district superintendents to conduct my study in their school district and to set up a meeting to discuss my study and an interview. I emailed them a brief proposal of my study and requested an appointment (see Appendix A). I met each of the superintendents at their district office, and during my appointment, I reiterated the activities, if any, that will occur at the site during the study, the use of the results and how they will be reported, as well as the advantage of the study for their district (see Appendix A; Bogdan & Biklen, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I conducted 30-60 minute in-depth, face-to-face interviews with the three superintendents using the protocol in Appendix B. Questions included background information about the district and the superintendent’s experience in education; district policies and procedures for communication about the tests, policies and procedures for information about opting out; and the superintendent’s insight into the future of the opt-out movement. Questions regarding communication about state tests and opt-out policies and procedures were adjusted according to each district’s current policies and procedures. In addition, I asked the advice of each superintendent as to which schools within their district would be the best location to collect my data. At the completion of each interview, all field
notes and the interview were transcribed verbatim using Rev.com and entered on the interview inventory spreadsheet.

**Interview/Principals.** Once I had permission, my next step was to contact the principals of the specific schools where I was conducting my dissertation study to make an appointment for interviews. I went out into the field and met each principal in their office and conducted in-depth, face-to-face, 30-60 minute interviews with the four principals of the selected elementary schools—one each in Butler and Culvert and two in Ashbury. I asked the principals to help with selecting participants for my study for both those who opt out and opt in to the state tests, and I was directed to the PTA Presidents in the Ashbury and Butler district and obtained a starter list of names, which I used to start snowball sampling.

Meanwhile, the principal of the selected school in Culvert supplied me with a list of possible participants to start snowball sampling. I used the interview protocol for the principals located in Appendix B. I selected open-ended interviewing because it allowed me to gather the perspectives of the informant and to find out information directly from the source (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). My goal in the interviews with the four principals was to gain understanding of how they made sense of the opt-out movement within their school. In addition, I asked about procedures, if any, that may be in place for communication for parent social networks between school to home regarding opting out. Lastly, I was interested in learning what policies and procedures, if any, were in place for parents who decide to opt their child out of the New York State tests.

In constructivist epistemology, the researcher “embraces their involvement and role within the research” (Golafshani, 2003, p. 600). As the qualitative researcher discussing the real world, the purpose of the interviews with PTA presidents is to get their perspectives on
the opt-out movement, how they made sense of it, and to enlist their help and support in (a) gathering other parents that are more involved and less involved, (b) obtaining contact information for the fourth-and fifth-grade class, and (c) sending out an email to the entire class about my study. Each school had its own demographic with Butler and Culvert’s largest population consisting of Latinx families. Although it was not necessary, I was prepared to have a Spanish speaker accompany me to assist with language translations that would allow me to engage in listening to all voices.

**Parent Interviews.** The purpose of the interviews was to listen to the parents and to learn about their experiences with the opt-out movement. I set a goal of 16-20 interviews per district or until I reached data saturation. Interviews took place in the neighborhood library, coffee shops, and at PTSA meetings in the Culvert district. I also attended PTA meetings in Ashbury and Butler districts and PTSA meetings and school-based events in the Culvert district to gather participants and to acquire observational data about the demographics of each district and an understanding of each district’s parent participation. In addition, in an effort to enlist participants, I provided each district with flyers in English and Spanish that explained the study, confidentiality, and the voluntary term of participation.

Before I began the interviews, I asked permission to record the sessions and promised confidentiality to participants by providing them with consent forms located in Appendix C titled *Informed Consent*. I used the semi-structured interview technique to gather information because it was the most direct way to attain the information from the source by asking open-ended questions, and it allowed the information to flow freely and to follow relevant topics that may stray from the protocol (Merriam, 2009). As the qualitative researcher discussing
the real world, the purpose of the interviews with parents was to get their perspectives on the opt-out movement and how they made sense of it.

Conducting qualitative research interviews can lead to further research questions and concepts to be examined in future research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Looking into people’s eyes and reading their body language and listening to the nuances of their speech lends to their story through field notes. Some participants were more eager to speak during a person-to-person interview because it was more private. I used the semi-structured interview protocol in Appendix E that allowed the flow of information and the option to edit and revise my questions. Butler and Culvert’s larger population was Latinx families. When necessary, I gathered informed consent via the consent form in Spanish (see Appendix D), and although it was not needed, I had the interview protocol available in Spanish (see Appendix F).

Corbin and Strauss (2008) emphasized, “One should include as many different perspectives on the issue or topic as feasible” (p. 273). In doing so, I used a goal of 16-20 interviews or as many as necessary until I reached saturation in each of the four schools (I utilized two schools in Ashbury due to a lack of participants). The Long Island opt-out movement continues to be a topic among parents, whether they support or oppose opting out of NYS tests.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis process was ongoing as the data were collected. I looked over, word processed, and organized my field notes and memos after each interview. This helped me recognize and reflect on any preconceived notions I may have had on the topic of the opt-out movement. The next step was to transcribe the in-depth interviews with superintendents, principals, and parents as they occurred verbatim with Rev.com. I used horizontalization to
examine the data by laying out the data for analysis as equally weighted, and then organized
the data by hand into clusters or themes on chart paper by color-coding each district.
Performing this process as the data came in afforded me the opportunity to reflect on the data
and begin to recognize common phrases or words as well as re-configure my interview
questions based on emerging themes.

Following the completion of the data transcription process, the result of doing
qualitative research was making discoveries in the data that form categories and lead to
central concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Using Dedoose, I began the coding process by
performing a categorical content analysis. I set up my codes according to my research
questions and then added and adjusted categories. For example, reasons parents gave for
opting out were layered and not all opt-out parents opted out of all of the tests. I reviewed the
data, made notes, and flagged potentially relevant information to my study. As Merriam
(2009) stated, it is like “having a conversation with the data, asking questions of it, making
comments to it, and so on” (p. 178). The data and the analysis were interwoven, so as the
data came in, new categories emerged and I had to regroup information. The process of
coding continued to evolve throughout the data analysis, as the information was funneled into
categories to answer my research questions.

The final step in the data analysis process was interpreting the data and telling the
story through the participants’ perspectives. Making meaning out of the data was the most
important component of the analysis in that it was the culmination of the coding, and the
information was organized to make meaning out of the way parents, superintendents, and
principals in the three districts perceived the opt-out movement. At this stage of the research,
the data told the reasons parents gave for opting out or not opting out of the NYS tests. The
data also revealed the flow of information that a group of fourth-and fifth-grade parents received from school, social media, and the news media in three suburban districts with a high, medium, and low opt-out rate. The interview data also illuminated the superintendents’ and principals’ perceptions of the opt-out movement and the procedures, if any, in place for those parents that choose to opt their child out of the state testing in their respective districts. Lastly, qualitative research can lead to further research questions and concepts to be examined in future research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The final step was a cross-case analysis of the three districts color-coded on chart paper according to my research questions and the demographical information per district.

Validity and Reliability

An important step in any research is to ensure validity in the data; for credibility. I used member checking in each of the three districts to search for negative instances and to attain respondent validation. I also cross-checked for alternative explanations in the data using the interview data, observational field notes, and memos. In addition, the descriptive detailed and reflective field notes were used to separate out categories versus personal reactions. Lastly, I shared analytic memos with the Co-Primary Investigator. I selected triangulation because the literature supports the use of more than one method for gathering data to ensure validity (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Golafshani, 2003; Seale, 1999). Included in the triangulation process were observational field notes taken at PTA meetings in the Ashbury and Butler districts and PTSA meetings and school-based events in the Culvert district. The field notes gave meaning and helped add understanding about the role parents played in their child’s education and the communication between home
and school. Analytic memos provided an extra level to the narrative by reflecting on the data on the opt-out phenomenon.

As I developed and began to categorize themes across the interview transcripts, it was essential to check for validity. I used member checking with two parents in each district and the principal in the Culvert district; I sent each one the section of my Chapter Four where I quoted or paraphrased their information. I selected this method to ensure that the participants were correctly portrayed through the information from the transcribed interviews to enhance the accuracy of the narrative (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Looking for consistency and stability determines if the researcher’s approaches are reliable (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To check for reliability, I reread the transcripts to be sure Rev.com did not make mistakes during transcription. I also checked for drift in the coding to maintain consistency in the definition of the codes. Lastly, I utilized my Co-Primary Investigator (dissertation chair) to critically review all codes, themes, and findings for accuracy (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

**Ethical Issues**

In utilizing phenomenological multi-case qualitative research methods, the researcher is an active participant in the data collection through interviews. The participants allow the researcher to enter their world, and the participants share their experiences with the topic of study. Approval from Molloy College’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) was necessary to guarantee ethical behavior on the part of the researcher while gathering data from human subjects. An approval letter from the IRB Committee was obtained before data collection began (see Appendix G).
The researcher’s goal is to understand and to make sense of the participant’s world through the eyes of the participant. To avoid any ethical issues, I explained my research topic through the purpose statement, gained informed consent, and guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity through the use of pseudonyms and secure storage of the data. I guaranteed authenticity of the data by using member checking as mentioned above in the validity section. As a researcher, I was reflexive in the process as I wrote memos to reflect on the process that assisted me in discovering themes in the gathered material. During interviews, I refrained from making any judgments (Merriam, 2009) and only participated in the interviews to ask the questions and probing questions.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has specifically identified and detailed the methodology and research paradigm I utilized in my dissertation. My study used qualitative methods with a phenomenological multi-case design. The data activities included interviews with superintendents, principals, and parents. The methodology of this study was an inquiry-based research paradigm with a constructivist worldview; therefore, I sought to understand the reasons parents gave for opting out or not opting their children out of the New York State tests in the fourth and fifth grades.

To understand the perspectives of parents, superintendents, and the principals, I conducted my study in three districts: one with a high, medium, and low opt-out rates. I selected four elementary schools. The qualitative method of research was important because it afforded me the opportunity to listen to and tell the story through the perspective of those who have firsthand experience with the opt-out movement. The theoretical contributions of this study are also important, because I believe that the information gathered from the study
will help support teachers and schools who are against neoliberal education reforms and a top-down model of education. Berger (2018) stated, “When students and teachers are learning together, administrators work to support vital learning systems, which they have helped modify so as not to be impediments to learning” (para. 7). In addition, the results of this study may assist policymakers interested in designing more effective assessments and accountability systems as a part of educational reform that improves education. Creating assessments that focus on student needs and strengths offers positive opportunities for both the students and the teachers to engage in learning opportunities that empower students and facilitate student involvement as a result of effective teaching.
CHAPTER FOUR

Overview of Findings

The findings of this dissertation study are focused on parents’ decision to either participate or not participate in the opt-out movement on Long Island. The opt-out movement consists of a group of parents that refuse to have their child participate in high-stakes standardized tests in English Language Arts (ELA) and/or Mathematics in grades three to eight (Pizmony-Levy & Cosman, 2017). The Long Island opt-out movement began in 2014 with Jeanette Deutermann, a mother who decided that high-stakes testing was not in her child’s best interest because the scores were being used to make important decisions about her child, teachers, schools, and districts (Croft et al., 2016). Media depictions of the reasons for the opt-out movement include the following eight items: (a) a culture of over-testing, (b) overly anxious and stressed out children, (c) teaching to the test in lieu of new and innovative lessons, (d) overabundance of test prep, (e) lack of transparency regarding what the tests are used for, (f) developmentally inappropriate test questions, (g) opposition to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) as a top-down intervention in public schools, and (h) corporate intervention in public schools as a means to rank students and schools (Strauss, 2016).

The opt-out movement is an important issue to understand on Long Island, New York, for many reasons. From 2014 to 2019, New York led the nation in opt-out rates, with 16% test refusals in 2019 (NYSED, 2019). Long Island leads the state in opt-out rates with Suffolk County totaling over half of eligible students and Nassau County with over a third who opted out of the 2019 ELA and math tests (Tyrrell, 2019; Tyrrell & Ebert, 2019). Although the opt-out numbers remain consistently high on Long Island, the opt-out rates vary across the 125 districts that comprise the Long Island public school system. Opt-out rates are
not represented equally across districts, specifically when comparing mostly White and Asian high—SES districts versus mostly Black and Latinx low—SES districts. The current literature on the opt-out movement is quantitative and indicates that the demographic of parents that opt out of the tests are mostly White, middle class, and highly educated, but does not offer reasons why there is a disparity (Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky, 2016; Wang, 2017). This study fills the gap in the literature by gathering the qualitative perspective on the spectrum of reasons parents have to opt their child out or opt them in to the NYS tests in ELA and math, as well as a deeper look at the factors surrounding the opt-out rates between and among Long Island districts.

The significance of this study was to learn about the reasons parents gave for opting out or opting in to state tests, adding a qualitative perspective to fill in the literature gap. The experience and decision making of parents have not been documented; therefore, this work gives voice to underrepresented people as well as a granular view of how parents make decisions about their child’s test taking. Through interviews with parents from districts with varying levels of opt-out rates, SES, and demographics, this study is the first that endeavors to make sense of why there is a racial/ethnic and SES discrepancy in participants and nonparticipants across Long Island. Further, it is the first to study the topic through the eyes of parents and their decision-making processes. The extant literature (Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky, 2016) does not contain the level of personal interview data that was collected for this study but rather contains survey data compiled from an overly broad sample that includes parents and nonparents. While the data from previous studies disaggregates for a number of factors, including SES, race/ethnic, and gender, this study adds detail and deeper
understanding of a carefully selected sample of parents from districts with a high opt-out rate, a medium opt-out rate, and a low opt-out rate.

The findings of this study can assist policymakers and district administrators across Long Island by helping them better understand how the current state testing system that was designed to make learning equal across race/ethnicity and SES has actually created more inequity. It has done that through a test-and-punish system that targets those in low-income, Black and Latinx schools and undermines the philosophy of public education as the ‘great equalizer’ in society (Growe & Montgomery, 2003). The overall goal of this study was to influence state testing policy by illuminating parents’ reasoning for opting out of the state tests. Parents are powerful policy actors that have been shown to influence policy at the district and school level (Bakeman, 2018). Furthermore, this dissertation calls on policymakers to enact legislation that supports a more equitable assessment and accountability system—one that (a) does not undermine the student and teacher relationship, (b) reports reliable individual growth of the students, (c) does not put undue pressure on low-income districts of color to raise scores or get sanctioned, and (d) fosters teaching and learning grounded in comprehensive educational pedagogy instead of test-prep materials for corporate profit.

**Research Questions and Summary of Findings**

The research conducted in this dissertation study examined how fourth-and fifth-grade parents in high, medium, and low opt-out districts made their decision to opt out or opt in their child to the NYS ELA and math tests. There is a racial/ethnic, SES, and regional disparity across Long Island and New York State school districts for those who choose to opt out. This study investigated the flow of information that parents received from the school,
other parents, social media, and the news media that may have informed their decision. In addition, this study examined the superintendents’ and principals’ perceptions of the opt-out movement in their respective districts, asking them to describe policies and procedures for school-to-home communication about testing and opting out. The main findings discussed in detail in this chapter are:

1. Parents make their decision to opt out or opt in based on the information they have access to from the district or social networks.

2. Latinx, immigrant families may not be able to access the social capital of the school community and are not always aware of their right to opt out of testing.

3. Although parents cite the original reasons from the opt-out movement, when making their decisions, the reasons they gave for opting out or opting in were mostly superficial and individualistic.

   The analysis and findings derived from the three frameworks that encompass the scope of this study: Christiansen’s four-stage model of a social movement, Bourdieu’s social capital theory, and rational choice theory. These frameworks are an integral part of the findings of this chapter. The district’s stance on opting out influences the success or failure of the movement described in the Christiansen (2009) model of a social movement. The parents are making their decision based on the information they have access to via the district or social networks. Latinx, immigrant families may not be able to access the social capital of the school community and are not always aware of their right to opt out of the testing (Bourdieu, 1973). Those parents that have access to the social capital of the school community make an informed choice to either opt out or opt in. Most parents draw upon the original reasons from the opt-out movement when making their choice (e.g., too stressful for my child). Parents are
making an individualistic choice for their child only instead of a collective one that would benefit all children.

This chapter is divided into four parts. Part One examines how parents make their decision to opt out or opt in across the three districts, followed by a cross-case comparison. Part Two investigates why parents make the decision to opt out or opt in across the three districts followed by a cross-case comparison. Part Three gathers the perceptions of the superintendents and principals about the opt-out rates within their respective districts and considers the conflict between their external message versus internal beliefs about the tests. In Part Four, I include an analysis of the three districts’ school-to-home communications along with their policies and procedures and then the conclusion.

In the following sections, I present a portrait of the superintendents’ leadership across the three districts to emphasize the first finding that parental opt-out rates reflect the attitudes toward the testing phenomenon of the district leadership. I found that parents made their decision based on the information given by the district and their social networks. The data showed that some parents were diligent in their quest for information about opting out of the NYS tests, while others, particularly Latinx families, tended to be less informed because of their social networks of information. The cross-case analyses revealed the disparity between the districts in providing information about parents’ rights to opt out of the testing. It also showed how the stakes attached to the tests are different between the high, medium, and low opt-out rates per district and were driven partially by information or lack of information. Chapter Four ends with a summation of the findings.
Part One

How Parents Make the Decision to Opt Out or Opt In

In the following section, I provide a synopsis of the Ashbury, Butler, and Culvert districts followed by a biography of the educational career of each of the three superintendents in the study. Following the biography, I will paint a picture of how parents make their decision to opt out or opt in their child to the NYS tests in ELA and math based on the information from the district and their social networks.

The Ashbury School District: High Opt Out, Low-Stakes Test

The Ashbury School District has a population of approximately 3,600 students. The student population is predominately White, 11% are eligible for free lunch, and 2% are eligible for reduced-price lunch (NCES, 2018). The residents of Ashbury have a median annual income of about $100,000, and 6% of the residents in the Ashbury district live below the poverty line (NCES, 2018). Ashbury has an opt-out rate greater than 50%. The proficiency rates in students who passed the ELA and math tests in 2018 were 30-35% of the students scored a Level 4 (the highest score) in ELA and 35-40% of the students scored a Level 4 for math. On both tests, 35-40% of the students scored a Level 3, (NYSED, 2018c).

Superintendent Kent has been the leader of the Ashbury School District for over 30 years and has worked in education over 50 years. Kent’s career began as a special education teacher in another district and then director of special education and superintendent in Ashbury. Kent is well known for a firm stance against the implementation of the Common Core curriculum and the unfair tests given before the standards were properly piloted and implemented. Superintendent Kent’s message through district forums was and continues to

1 Participants, districts and schools were given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality
be the developmental inappropriateness of the tests that are rendered useless in evaluating teachers and student achievement, and his unwavering support for parent choice in opting out.

Interviews and data revealed that in the Ashbury district, the philosophy of the district leader regarding the opt-out movement is one of the considerations for parents’ decisions to either opt out in agreement or opt in in disagreement with Kent’s views. Superintendent Kent does not believe that the New York State tests are a valid instrument of measurement. Kent stated, “For me to go out there and push parents to have their child take it, I’d be lying to myself.” Administrators and parents in the district report Superintendent Kent’s vocal disdain for the tests. For example, Principal Vaughn, of the Astor Lane Elementary School in the Ashbury School District, attributed the district’s high opt-out rates to the forthcoming information about the tests and opting out from the superintendent. Vaughn stated, “Superintendent Kent is very vocal and spoke in forums, in the community, and has written things about it. I would say that our superintendent is not a fan of the state test, does not believe it’s a legitimate test.” Kent’s disapproval of the test is grounded in the same historical context that created the opt-out movement. According to Superintendent Kent, back when the tests changed over to the Common Core version of the tests in ELA and math, the extensive time spent prepping and testing “started this whole ball [opting out] rolling.” Kent’s attitude toward the test reflected the concerns that drove the opt-out movement and reinforce the claim of this study that the attitude of the superintendent is a consideration for parents as part of the decision-making process.

As previously stated, Superintendent Kent is not satisfied with the New York State tests in ELA and mathematics as a testing instrument of measure that should be used to drive
instruction to place students in appropriate classes/programs, or to evaluate teachers.

Superintendent Kent stated:

I am not preparing kids for an invalid test. The state has declared it invalid. I’m not permitted to use it for the placement of a child or the promotion of a child, and so I can’t use it also to evaluate teachers. You tell me what the message is.

Kent went on to say that the district is not “trying to run away from accountability” and wished there was a way to stand before the district and declare the test as a “great exam,” but Kent does not believe that it is a valid test. Superintendent Kent’s view aligns with the literature claiming that the NYS ELA and math tests are developmentally inappropriate and not a useful, valid measure for achievement (Brooks, 2018). Therefore, Superintendent Kent and the Ashbury administration respects parents’ right to opt out.

Superintendent Kent has been and continues to be forthcoming with information about the tests and his opinion of the tests to the parents of the Ashbury district. Principal Strauss, of the Alcott Elementary School in the Ashbury district, explained that the district held a community forum in January 2016 to discuss the Common Core curriculum and the new tests in ELA and mathematics. The panel was composed of local legislators, members of the Education Committee, Superintendent Kent, Principal Strauss, a neighboring district’s superintendent, and Jeanette Deutermann, leader of the Long Island Opt Out Info (Costello, 2016). The meeting lasted for two hours, and each member of the panel outlined their concerns and problems with the Common Core curriculum and the tests for grades three through eight. Strauss explained how Superintendent Kent spoke at great lengths about the lack of reliability and validity of the tests and the excessive time needed to take the tests. The Ashbury district has continued this tradition by scheduling an annual forum on state testing.
They invite a panel consisting of teachers from multiple grade levels and subjects along with building principals—one representing each elementary school, and the middle and high school. The evening opens with remarks from Superintendent Kent, speakers present both sides of the opt-out debate, and then the floor is open to the community to ask questions.

When I asked Principal Strauss the reason for the high opt-out rate in the Ashbury district, the principal said that Superintendent Kent allows the principals to “develop their own culture” about the testing and opting out within their school; Principal Strauss created a culture of honesty with the parents. When a parent asks the principal whether their child should take the test, Strauss reportedly tells parents, “If your child wants to take the test, I don’t care if they can or can’t, you let them take it. If your child is stressed under classroom conditions, then opt them out.” Therefore, according to the administrators interviewed for this study, parents’ rights to choose what is best for their child are respected and should be based on the needs of the individual child. Despite Strauss’ way of responding to parents who inquire about opting out, the principal still believes that “everyone needs to be assessed; [however] it’s a matter of the actual test itself.” The administrators of the Ashbury district are in agreement that assessment is necessary but that the state tests are a flawed measurement. Instead, they are using the computer adaptive North West Evaluation Association (NWEA) test as an alternative assessment tool administered to students in kindergarten through the eighth grade. Superintendent Kent said the NWEA is administered three times per year, the testing time is 45 minutes, and the results are returned the next day. The NWEA is used to show academic growth.
Parents are Informed Decision Makers

Parents in the Ashbury district are well aware of the district’s stance as being pro-opt out because the state exams are invalid. Parents are given a plethora of information from the district about the tests via the annual testing forum, the school website, and PTA meetings. Parents know that the district supports parents’ right to opt out. For example, when I asked parents about their sense of the district’s standpoint on opting out, Lori, a White opt-out parent, said, “Superintendent Kent made it clear that he was not a believer in this particular test.” She went on to say that Kent’s aversion to the test stems from the way it was drafted, administered, and the fact that you cannot use it to drive instruction. Naomi, a White opt-out parent, stated, “I feel that our district is incredibly supportive of opting out.” The strong sense of the district’s pro-opt out stance is also felt by opt-in parents, as told by Carol, a White opt-in parent, who posited, “I hate to say it, but I feel like there was a promotion of opting out.” Talia, a White opt-in parent, also believed that “the district definitely does not push the children in the direction of the test.” Overall, 12 out of the 17 parents interviewed spoke about the district’s pro opt-out position; one parent said she opted in and was not interested in any other position, while the remaining four parents said in the past, it was talked about but not recently.

I found that parents in the sample were well-informed about their right to opt out in the Ashbury district because they can easily access the social capital of their school and from the parent community. Superintendent Kent referred to them as “sophisticated listeners and watchers” who are making a conscious, informed decision for their child. In addition, the district shares opt-out information via the yearly information forum. They share dates on the school calendar for the tests. Paper notices are sent home with the students as a reminder of
the test dates, and a form is sent home two months prior to the testing dates with a tear-off on
the bottom that asks parents if they are opting out. Superintendent Kent said the letters were
sent out early for logistical reasons. He explained they have to figure out “how to manage the
space in the building.” In terms of students who require a separate testing location, extended
time, and other accommodations require a specific that meets their accommodations as well
as another space and supervision for the students who opt out. Consequently, according to
Superintendent Kent, there needs to be dedicated space and staff to accommodate all of the
moving parts that go into the testing environment.

Furthermore, parents may not choose to opt their child out of all of the tests, which
creates another issue in planning space and staff. Out of the eight opt-out parents interviewed
in the Ashbury district, four parents opted out of the ELA, math, and science (fourth grade),
while two parents opted out of just the ELA, and two opted out of the ELA and math. Kent
explained that part of the reason for the letter is the large number of opt-outs. He said they
are about 80-90% successful with response rates to the letter, but there are always those
parents that walk in the day of the test with a note to opt their child out.

Parents in the Ashbury district were confident in their decision to opt out their child
from the NYS tests in ELA and math because they had information from the district about
the tests and the assurance from the administrators that it is their right to choose what is in
their child’s best interest when making the decisions to opt out or opt in to the tests. After
careful analysis, the main reasons parents in the Ashbury district opted their child out of the
tests were due to the stress and anxiety caused by the tests, the tests do not count, there is no
reason to take them, and their discomfort with their child’s test scores used to evaluate
teachers. Part Two gives a comprehensive account of how parents, in their own words, made their decision to opt out their child from the tests.

The Butler School District: Medium Opt Out, Medium-Stakes Test

The Butler School District has a population of approximately 1,900 students, and Latinx is the most prevalent ethnicity in grades kindergarten to 12th grade. About 40% of the student population is eligible for free lunch and 7% are eligible for reduced-price lunch (NCES, 2018). The median annual income of the residents of the Butler district is $100,000, and 6% live below the poverty line (NCES, 2018). The Butler district reports an opt-out rate of 30-40%. Proficiency in ELA and math in 2018 was 10-15% of the students scored a Level 4 on the ELA test, the highest score, and 15-20% scored a Level 4 on the math, while 25-30% scored a Level 3 in ELA and math (NYSED, 2018c).

Since 2018, the superintendent for the Butler district is Superintendent Simmons who has been in education for 23 years. Prior to coming to the Butler district, Superintendent Simmons’ career began in the classroom as a first and sixth-grade teacher, a Math, Science, Technology, and Engineering (MSTE) teacher (currently known as Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math [STEM]), an Advanced Placement (AP) math teacher, and math Academic Intervention Services (AIS) teacher. Superintendent Simmons started his administrative career in Butler first as a kindergarten principal, a high school principal, assistant superintendent, and currently superintendent. As stated in the interview, Simmons has a neutral stance on opting out and would like to see the tests: (a) changed to every other year, (b) administered earlier in the school year, and (c) tests scores returned in a timely manner to drive instruction.
In the Butler School District, the stance on opting out has changed over the past four years with the change of district leadership. During the initial implementation of the Common Core tests in 2013, and, in the language of Christiansen, the *emergence stage* (Christiansen, 2009) of the opt-out movement, the Butler district, currently a medium opt-out district, held an information forum that delivered a very different message from the Ashbury district’s message. According to Henry, a White opt-out parent of a fourth-grader in Buchanan Elementary School in the Butler district:

> The administration in place, at the time, came out and said that if the students do not take the test, there will be financial ramifications. Basically, they said there is no such thing as opting out. This set the tone for parents to look elsewhere for their information. So we left that meeting feeling a little lied to because we knew there were people opting out, and then we made a decision to opt out.

Years later, under the new administration, Superintendent Simmons’ message regarding opt out has shifted. Although Simmons does not have a “philosophical problem with testing,” Simmons cited the turnaround time of the test scores and the lack of ability to use the scores to drive instruction as problematic. Simmons also expressed the opinion that the opt-out rate in the district was related to teachers residing in the district, Simmons explained, “I also believe the opt-out movement is really centered around teachers, quite honestly. We do have some teachers in our district who live in our district, so they kind of promote that [opting out].” The data showed that many parents who chose to opt their child out did so because of solidarity with teachers, as reported below.

Principal Owens, of the Buchanan Elementary School, agreed with the superintendent that the test is not a valid and useful instrument of measurement for achievement. Owens
stated the blame for the opt-out movement lies solely on the state, citing, “The state created a very rigorous test without allowing people time to adjust.” Owens said teachers and students were not able to adjust to the new standards and the test format in only a few months, and the rollout of the new standards and tests should have happened over a longer period of time. Owens continued to say that the equation given to figure out teacher evaluations was difficult to figure out and challenged the validity of the formula to rate teachers based on their students’ test scores.

In the Butler district, distribution of information about the test is through the PTA, PTSA, SEPTA, the district website with links to the state website, automated telephone calls, and dates on the district calendar. At the building level, the principal sends home a letter a week before the test dates to remind the parents about the tests and to have their child eat a good breakfast and get a good night’s sleep. Superintendent Simmons explained that they do not send a letter home with the option to opt out, stating, “We don’t get involved with that.” According to Principal Owens, if parents in the Butler district want to opt out, they just send in a letter. When I asked Superintendent Simmons about the medium opt-out rates in his district, he replied:

I do not think that there was a tremendous amount of sharing of information. We don't get great turnouts at the board meeting, PTA. We do have a segment of our population, who are new to the country, new to education, new to learning experiences, so they're not as involved in that [opting out] process yet as others may be.

Principal Owens agreed with Superintendent Simmons’ statement about teachers’ connection to the opt-out movement and the teachers who live within the district who may
promote opting out and stated, “A lot of the feedback I am receiving is genuinely from parents who are educators, and they are opposed to the testing questions and the rigor of the test, the appropriateness, and the validity.” Both Superintendent Simmons and Principal Owens agree that the NYS tests in ELA and math are not a valid and reliable instrument of achievement. The NYS test scores are only one piece of the data, and the Butler district uses the NWEA as another source to gauge individual student growth.

As decision makers, parents in the Butler district are responsible for conducting their own research about the opt-out movement to know as much as possible to make a solid decision that yields the best results for their child. In the Butler district, the opt-out stance from the administration is neutral and offers information about the tests and administration dates and not about parental rights to opt out. Leslie, a White opt-out parent, explained:

The communication is not to my standards. It’s not enough coming from the school and the district because I know, from being a teacher as well, that information eases nerves. When we don’t have it [information], we make up our own stories. If I don’t contact them [administrators], I don’t get information.

Leslie started going to school board meetings and said, “It’s very old fashion[ed] and an antiquated way to communicate what is going on in the school.” When it comes to parents’ right to opt out their child or any negative issues about the tests, parents are on their own to garner the needed information.

Not All Parents are Informed Decision Makers

Parents in the Butler district are not well-informed about the opt-out movement, and the lack of information from the district and school level is causing the parents to look elsewhere to obtain information. Some parents feel the district is pro opt in, as Kendra, a
White opt-out parent, stated, “They would like the kids to opt in.” One parent mentioned that the previous administration had a presentation for test anxiety at a PTA meeting. Brittany, a White opt-in parent, recounted:

Towards the end of the meeting, someone asked about opting out, and they got very defensive and just said something like, ‘No, you have to be here for the test.’ They were not having a discussion around that at all.

Although the previous administration did not want to engage in any opt-out discussions, the new administration, led by Superintendent Simmons, is viewed as more neutral about opting out, which is viewed by some parents as being confusing.

Out of the 19 parents interviewed, 11 parents believed that the district does not communicate a clear or complete message on the issue of opting out. Brooke, a White opt-out parent, said the information is about the test only and no real “commandment” about taking it. Jason, a White opt-out parent, said, “I really don’t hear that much of a conversation about opting out anymore.” Natalie, a White opt-in parent, stated, “It’s kind of not talked about; it’s the elephant in the room.” With the change of district leaders, came a change from the staunch message to opt in to a more neutral stance without any further information.

According to administrators, the opt-out numbers in the district are partially due to the information provided by teachers living in and out of the district.

In the Butler district, some parents are conducting their own research about opting out and the issues of the movement. When I asked parents what is their experience in a district with a 30-40% opt-out rate, Natalie, a White opt-in parent, answered, “The level of discussion in my district is not the same as other districts in the surrounding districts. Parents may be under the impression that taking the tests is part of the school day and are not
questioning it.” Leslie, a White opt-out parent, determined, “I don’t think they know what to do, so I think a lot of parents are old school and if the school tells you to do something, they want to trust the school.” Brooke, a White opt-out parent, added, “I think our district stance is kind of this is the test and your child has to take it.” Mary, a White opt-in parent, posited, “I would say our rates reflect the fact that maybe some parents don’t know that they can [opt out] because there’s really not that much about opting out; they really don’t push that.” The group of parents they are referring to who are generally not informed are the Latinx, immigrant families in the district. Most parents, however, relied on social networks, family members that are teachers, teacher friends, and the Internet for their information about the opt-out movement.

In addition to the lack of a clear district message, over the last two years, the demographics in Butler have changed. In the academic year 2016-2017, to the current year 2018-2019, the district population of Latinx families has increased by two percent (NYSED, 2018b). As previously described, Superintendent Simmons stated there is a portion of the population that are new to the country and the education system, and they may not be as involved in the process. Research shows that there is a disparity in access to broadband and computers between White, Black, and Latinx households, which create a breach in communication between the school community and the home raising the possibility of a digital divide (‘Digital Divide, 2017). Principal Owens claimed that Spanish-speaking members of the Butler community who can access the district and school websites have mobilized in the neighborhood to assist those in need with technological issues, but no evidence of this was revealed in the interviews.
Parents that are not able to access the social capital of the school community are not informed. Tina, a White opt-in parent, remarked:

If you are involved in the grapevine, you can get some information about the test and your options. We have a lot of ESL children, so their parents are not involved in the day-to-day PTA stuff. So they don’t hear it, and I think they just think it’s part of the standard, go to school, and this is what I have to do. I have to take the test.

The one Latinx parent interviewed in the Butler district opts in for the tests and was aware and involved in the school community. Yamilla, a Latina opt-in parent, lived in the Butler district as a young child growing up and was very familiar with the district and actively attended PTA meetings and functions. Yamilla confirmed that attendance at PTA meetings is not what it should be and posited, “My background’s Hispanic. I know there’s Hispanic people around the community. I’m sure it could be a little bit hard, but there’s always ways to communicate.”

Parents in the Butler district conduct their own research on opting out, and Butler has maintained a consistent opt-out rate since 2016 (“Projects: ELA and Math Opt-Out Rates 2016-2019,” 2019). Brooke, a White opt-in parent, confirmed, “I find that the majority of the families that are considering opting out or have opted out kind of do so because of the research they’ve done on their own.” According to the data, there are parents who may not be aware of the movement. Parents who have conducted their own research through a variety of networks are making a rational choice that is in the best interest of their child only, whether it is to opt out or opt in. Those without access to information are not making a rational choice.

Again, the information provided by the district seems to be a critical piece of the equation. In the Butler district, the lack of clarity about the district’s stance on opting out
increased the level of outside research required among the parent decision makers. With the change of administration in the Butler district also came a change in the anti-opt-out perspective to a neutral perspective towards the opt-out movement. The parents who have the social capital to access the school community are on their own to research the opt-out movement, and the Latinx community who may not have the social capital to access the school community may be completely uninformed about their right to opt out of the NYS tests in ELA and math.

Although the flow of information about opting out in the Butler district is strictly reminders about the test dates, parents interviewed for this study did utilize social networks to attain the needed information to make their decision to opt out or opt in their child to the NYS tests in ELA and math. After reviewing the data and categorizing the themes, the three major themes that emerged for the opt-out parents were: (a) testing causes stress, pressure, and anxiety; (b) the test does not count; and (c) test scores tied to teacher evaluations. In Part Two, parents, in their own words, reveal why, through their own research, they made the decision to opt out their child from the tests.

**The Culvert District: Low Opt Out, High-Stakes Test**

The Culvert School District has a population of approximately 3,300 students with a majority of Latinx students in grades kindergarten to 12th grade. About 40% of the student population is eligible for free lunch, and 5% are eligible for reduced-price lunch (NCES, 2018). The median annual income of the residents of the Culvert district is $80,000, and 10% live below the poverty line (NCES, 2018). The Culvert district reports an opt-out rate of less than 20% and proficiency in ELA and math in 2018 was that 5-10% of the students
scored a Level 4 on both tests, the highest score. For math, 15-20% scored a Level 3 and for ELA, 20-25% scored a Level 3 (NYSED, 2018c).

Superintendent Iams has been the leader of the Culvert School District since 2014 and has been in education for 21 years. Superintendent Iams began as a substitute teacher in Culvert before transferring to New York City as a classroom teacher for five years. Iams returned to Culvert as a classroom teacher for three years before moving up to administration as the director of grants, coordinator of elementary education, and assistant superintendent. Superintendent Iams’ stance on the NYS tests and the opt-out movement for the district is pro-testing and anti-opt out. Iams wants to be in compliance with the state and not draw any unwanted scrutiny to the district. As previously stated, Culvert’s scores are in the low percentile, and boosting the scores is a concern of the district. Superintendent Iams personally felt the tests are not valid and useful. Iams said, “I would like to see more culturally relevant stories, passages that students read, even besides culturally relevant, interesting. As far as the passages, they are boring and irrelevant and the students cannot connect.” Although Iams is not a proponent of the NYS tests, as the superintendent of a low-performing district, Iams is determined to comply with the state to avoid any scrutiny.

The Culvert School District had the lowest opt-out rate, and as with other districts, the message sent by the administration was influenced in parents’ decision-making. In the Culvert district, nine out of the sixteen parents interviewed for this study said the district stance was pro-opt in. Parent interviews revealed that the district’s information about opting out was not enough, and parents sought outside information via family, friends, the Internet, and teachers.
The Culvert district’s stance is anti-opt out. Superintendent Iams posited, “I think we just continue to do what we have to do to be in compliance with New York State.” Iams continued to say that the district relies on state aid and cannot afford to lose that aid, so they will just “stay under the radar.” In order to be in compliance, the district must maintain the 95% participation rate of the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals set by the state. Iams continued to point out that even though no sanctions were leveled against districts with a high opt-out rate, the low district scores places Culvert in the category of underperforming. Six out of the 16 parents interviewed in the Culvert district reported that they did not get the sense that the district wanted them to opt out since the district and the school seemed reluctant to provide even basic information about opting out, and all but one of the six parents did opt out. Helena, a Latina opt-out parent, confirmed, “I don’t think I am getting the sense that we’re being encouraged to opt out. It’s just information about the test dates.” Other parents repeated this sentiment, adding that they were relying on the district for information and guidance. Jenna, a Latina opt-out parent, explained that the school never told her she could opt out. She learned of her right to opt her child out from a source outside of the school. Only when she called the school to ask about the testing policy, did the school tell her it was her choice.

Some parents did report getting information from the school but explained that it seemed they were discouraging parents from deciding to opt out. Imani, a Black opt-in parent, expressed, “They give you the option, but they aren’t encouraging you to opt out.” Javier, a Latino opt-in parent, agreed, “I dunno if it was last year or maybe two years ago that they did mention it [opting out] was optional.” Deja, a Black opt-in parent, said the Culvert
district gave the parents the option to opt out or opt in and perceived the message to be neutral.

Although the Culvert administration is promoting opting in to the tests, they questioned the validity and reliability of the NYS ELA and math tests as useful instruments of measure to drive instruction. Superintendent Iams shared:

Having been a classroom teacher and seeing what it does to students, I don’t see the point of the test; I don’t think the tests are fair. I think it’s tremendously unfair to judge a student with a state test.

She argued that the test lacks “culturally relevant stories or passages” in the reading excerpts, that the test is “boring,” and that what the state is actually testing is unclear. Principal Jones agreed with Superintendent Iams calling the tests “biased.” Jones clarified, “The tests are biased and need to include more content and literature that mirrors diverse communities and includes vocabulary and stories that are aligned with student experiences.” Jones continued to state, “I do feel that students should have high expectations, and they should aspire to do their best and work as hard as they can.” Jones concluded that the tests, as written, are not fostering student success. The Culvert district administers the computer-adaptive STAR Benchmark Assessment three times per year as another instrument to measure student growth.

Superintendent Iams believed that the students that are opting out are those achieving scores of level 3’s and 4’s (the highest scores). Iams asserted, “Those [high achieving] students are from households where parents are more astute as far as their knowledge and understanding of the opt-out movement and what testing is.” Iams wants those students to take the tests to raise the district’s state achievement report card. At the building level,
Principal Jones holds a pep rally the week before the test to boost the morale of the teachers and the students, claiming that she tells the students to “just do your best” as a positive influence for them to take the test. When I asked Principal Jones if parents have called asking for opt-out information, she replied, “I’ve had parents say to me, ‘We’re not doing so well so why does it matter if we opt out’?” Principal Jones went on to say:

I’ve told them that every child matters. There is such a thing of 95% participation rate that we should have and maybe for other districts that doesn’t matter, but for us, we do depend heavily on New York State funds; it matters. The test does not define what their child will become, and we took tests when we were in school.

Ultimately, Jones “scales it back” and tells parents that the decision is theirs to make and to do what is best for their child, but Principal Jones does not want the district to be subject to any unnecessary scrutiny from the state.

Another explanation for the low opt-out rate, according to Iams, is an influx of Latinx families in the Culvert district. Iams opined, “They may be first or second-generation immigrants where their parents may not be English speakers and may not understand the whole opt-out movement.” As noted in the annual School Report Card for the academic year of 2015 and for 2017, the Latinx population in the Culvert School district increased from 50% to 60% (NYSED, 2016, 2018a). Even though the Culvert district is making strides to become more bilingual with school notices, their district calendar, and translators at PTSA meetings and parent-teacher meetings, there are still Latinx parents who are underrepresented in institutional activities and their involvement and engagement within the school community.
is limited (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). The lack of parental involvement was evident in the challenge of acquiring participants from the Latinx community for this study.

**Most Parents are Not Informed**

Parents in the Culvert district are not as informed as in the other two districts, and according to the superintendent and principal, the district overall has low parent involvement. Therefore, parents get information about opting their child out of tests from other sources. The five parents interviewed for this study who opted out obtained their information from family and friends, the news media, social media, and Google. For the 11 parents interviewed for this study who opted in, not all were equally informed: (a) seven parents were aware they could opt out but not informed about the opt-out movement agenda, (b) one parent never heard of the opt-out movement, (c) one parent consulted co-workers, (d) one parent consulted friends with children, (e) one parent went on personal Facebook, and (f) one parent said opting out is not an option and did not do research. Information about the test dates are sent via the district and the school by posted test dates on the district calendar, automated telephone calls, reminder letters, district website announcements, and the Culvert app. According to Principal Jones, only portions of the school calendar are bilingual, not including the test dates, and paper notices sent home are in English and Spanish.

As of the past year, information to opt out is disseminated in Spanish by local Latinx organizations outside of the Culvert district. With the influx of Latinx families, English is not their first language. Parents in the Latinx community who cannot gain access to the school community in their language are at a disadvantage, which leads to isolation from the school community (Bourdieu, 1973, 1984). In December 2018 at a PTSA meeting I attended at Cambridge Elementary School in the Culvert School District, Principal Jones offered
auditory devices to the Latinx parents along with a translator that spoke in Spanish into a microphone, which translated the meeting into Spanish for the parents.

Maria, a Latina opt-in parent, shared her concerns about the translator and the audio devices. She believed that parents who do not speak English need more support, such as district-sponsored classes to teach them English. Without this support, parents do not have the correct information or any information. She asserted, “District pay a lot of money for these things [the devices] to translate. If you have a program for parents to learn English, you don’t need the translator.” Maria stated that parents depend on their children to translate the correspondences from the school. She concluded, “Maybe more parents would attend different meetings if they understood what was going on.”

According to Superintendent Iams, low attendance at district-sponsored meetings and school PTSA meetings is a contributing factor to the limited access to information parents in the district have. Iams explained, “In this district, the conversation really doesn’t happen. Parents do not come to board meetings to express any support or nonsupport of the testing. They’re very quiet.” While citing the parents’ low attendance as a factor for their lack of information, Iams’ message was inconsistent—even if there were high participation at the meetings, the parents would not likely receive information about opting out from the district. Iams was clear that the opt-out movement is not a “high priority for us” explaining that because they are a low-performing district, they are “starting from so far behind.” Principal Jones noted that there is a steady increase of opt outs each year due to parents “having conversations with family members that live in different districts and the more they hear about families opting out, they too are going to join in.” Jones confirmed, “I think we might be on the brink of an increase of opt outs.” Again, it is evident that the district does not
provide a coherent message to parents who are ultimate decision makers about whether to have their child opt out or opt in to the NYS tests.

Parents in the Culvert district reported in the interviews that they want the information necessary to make an informed decision. Deshawana, a Black opt-out parent, concluded that the parents in the district do not have a great deal of information about the opt-out movement and saw no purpose to opting out. She noted, “I think it’s just like, it’s school, so you have to take the test.” Interestingly, out of the eleven parents interviewed for this study, only three thought that testing is a part of life and a part of school. The parents interviewed for this study attend teacher conferences, and they want to garner the information about their child and their options for their child. This indicates a disconnect with the views expressed by administrators who attributed the parents’ absence from school board meetings to parental disinterest in the process. This research suggested that parents are, in fact, interested in making the right decision for their child. However, with a lack of information, there is a disparity with parents making a rational choice in the Culvert district. For Culvert, without parent leadership, parents are not collaborating and working together for the greater good of their school community, which is currently run by the administration and the teachers in the school.

Parents in the Culvert district are opting out but not in high numbers. The administration is forthcoming with test dates but not opt-out information. Part Two details the three themes that emerged from the data as reasons parents gave for opting out their child as the following: (a) testing is too much pressure; (b) the test does not count; and (c) there is too much test prep, which is one of the original complaints from the opt-out movement.
Cross-Case Comparison

There is a substantial gap among the districts for parent information on opting out. The superintendent of the Ashbury district is completely forthcoming and speaks out publicly about the lack of value of NYS ELA and math tests. Principal Vaughn of the Ashbury district called Superintendent Kent “outspoken” and “vocal” about the tests and opting out. Principal Strauss called the test “ridiculous” and the district has created a culture of “honesty” with parents. The principals and the teachers, when asked, have honest conversations with the parents, even if the outcome is for the parent to choose to opt out. Superintendent Kent stated, “I honor the decision of parents to opt out of an exam.” Kent called Ashbury parents sophisticated and informed, and Strauss mentioned that parents are working professionals. With a predominantly White population of educated professional parents, this district confirmed the findings in prior studies that parents who opt out are of this demographic and make an informed decision (Au, 2017; Bennett, 2016a; Hildebrand, 2017; Klein, 2016; Murphy, 2017; Phi Delta Kappa & Gallup Poll, 2017; Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky, 2016; Ryan, 2016; Tompson et al., 2013).

In contrast, the Butler district and the Culvert district parents are not informed directly by the district. In fact, they must do their own research to find out about their right to opt their child out of the tests. For these two districts, with a significant number of Latinx families in the district, they have their own set of challenges related to language. It was challenging to gather Latinx parents in the Butler district for this study, and the attendance at a PTA meeting I attended at Butler had fewer than ten parents. Also in Butler, the White parents are well aware that the Latinx community is disenfranchised from the school community, but they have not come up with a plan to address the issue. The lack of
participation holds true in the Culvert district as well. I attended a Culvert PTSA meeting with low attendance, which provided an auditory device to Latinx parents who did not understand or speak English. There was an interpreter who translated the meeting from English to Spanish. There were not enough devices for all parents, but some shared them. Principal Jones explained they hoped to obtain more devices in the future.

During the interview with Maria, a Latina opt-in parent from the Culvert School district, spoke about the translator and the audio devices. She stated that parents who do not speak English need more support by way of district-sponsored classes to teach them English. Without this support, parents do not have the correct information or any information. Principal Jones communicated with the Latinx parents in sparse Spanish and is learning more and more Spanish each day to better communicate with the parents directly and not through an interpreter or by sending them to the ENL director.

Part Two

Why Parents Make the Decision to Opt Out or Opt In

This dissertation study aimed to unearth the reasons parents gave for opting out or opting in their child from the NYS tests in ELA and math. The parents interviewed for this study were from three Long Island school districts one that reported high opt-out rates, medium opt-out rates, and low opt-out rates. A breakdown by district, opt-out rate, race/ethnicity, and opt-out or opt-in status is provided in Table 5. The following section reports the reasons parents gave for opting out, opting in, and those that chose to opt out and opt in.
Table 5

_Parent Interviews by District_

<table>
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<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Opt-out Rate</th>
<th>Opt-In</th>
<th>Opt-Out</th>
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<td>&gt;50%</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(Predominantly White)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>White parents</td>
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<td>Black parents</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latinx parents</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Butler School District</strong></td>
<td>30-40%</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(Most prevalent Latinx)</td>
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<td>White parents</td>
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<tr>
<td>Latinx parents</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Culvert School District</strong></td>
<td>&lt;20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Mostly Latinx)</td>
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<td>Latinx parents</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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Ashbury School District: Reasons Parents Gave for Opting Out

After careful consideration of the findings of this study, the comprehensive information from the district about the NYS tests and parental right to opt out sparked parents in the Ashbury district to have conversations with family and friends regarding the tests and their decision to opt out their child from the tests. Information directly from Superintendent Kent was that the tests are an invalid instrument of measure and is not used to drive instruction, measure student achievement, or evaluate teachers. Parents from the Ashbury district who opted out reported that it was because of the: (a) unnecessary stress and anxiety, (b) the test does not count/no reason to take it, and (c) tests scores are tied to teacher
evaluations. Parents in the Ashbury district used the information gleaned from the district as a consideration to investigate the opt-out movement and to make the best decision that meets the individual needs of their child.

**Unnecessary Stress and Anxiety**

Five out of the eight opt-out parents in the Ashbury district interviewed cited unnecessary stress and anxiety associated with the tests as the reason they opt out their child. Concern for the well-being of their child was at the forefront of their minds in deciding to opt out. Two out of the eight parents who opted out also have a child with an Individual Education Plan (IEP). An IEP is an education plan designed for the individual child’s unique educational needs (Baumel, 2016). Janice, a White opt-out parent, said, “My youngest daughter has a learning disability, so it’s even more difficult for her to grasp concepts with the way things are being taught.” Janice went on to say that other children who do well in class and are good test takers may be able to sit through the test and make it through, but her daughter would come out of the test thinking, “Oh my god! I am horrible. I’m dumb. I don’t know any of the questions.” Janice said the unnecessary stress and anxiety would lower her daughter’s confidence and performance in school. Lori, a White opt-out parent, also has a child with an IEP. She stated, “My son is a special education student, and we have a unique set of battles with him in terms of him being assessed from year to year. We did not feel he needed to be stressed with this particular test.” Lori did go on to say that her son does participate in the NWEA and has no problem with stress or anxiety because the test is computer-adaptive, and it takes about 45 minutes for the entire test. When making the decision to opt out of the tests, parents of children with IEPs do so to meet their child’s individual needs.
Parents who have children in the general education class are also concerned about the stress and anxiety that is placed on their child due to the tests. Nadine, a White opt-out parent, shared, “I don’t think they need the extra stress.” Superintendent Kent stated that during the initial administration of the Common Core state tests in 2013, the length of the test and the difficulty of the questions “overwhelmed” the students. Kent said, “When I say overwhelmed, there were kids crying.” Stress and anxiety is one of the talking points in the opt-out agenda.

The effect of the test on students’ emotional well-being was a decision-making factor for Cathy, a White opt-out parent. She refused to have her daughter take the test in 2019 in the fourth grade due to her daughter’s reaction to the tests in the third grade. Cathy shared:

For me, it was like, I’m like, oh she’s gonna take it and see how she does. She did not do well with the pressure of the test. She did not do well with some of the questions, and some of the things were not very easy for her to understand. Her teacher, after the test, said she was a nervous mess of crying, which is not like her. So when it was time to do it again, I said there’s no reason to do this at all.

Likewise, BethAnn, a White opt-out parent, questioned, “What’s the point to have them be stressed out about a test?” Brenda, a White opt-out parent, was “immediately on board” with opting out of the tests. She stated, “Why add additional stress with these tests to their already stressed little lives?” As informed decision makers, the parents in the Ashbury district are concerned about the stress and anxiety that comes from the pressure of the tests.

**The Test Does Not Count/No Reason to Take It**

One of the original goals of the New York State English Language Arts and Mathematics tests was to measure achievement. Due to the pressure exerted by the opt-out
movement and the multiple complaints from administrators, teachers, students, and parents about the tests, in 2015, just two years after the first administration of the Common Core test, a four-year moratorium was issued (Hildebrand, 2015). The moratorium prohibited the use of test scores to measure student achievement and evaluate teachers, which caused some districts, with high overall test scores, to deem the tests a waste of time and money.

Superintendent Kent stated that the test results could not be used as an instrument of measure for student achievement, to evaluate teachers, or to drive instruction. Opt-out parents in the Ashbury district agreed that putting their children through the pressure of tests that, as one parent replied, do not “count towards anything” was not tenable. They felt that having their child sit through a test that has no educational purpose and is a waste of teaching time is a reason to opt out. BethAnn, a White opt-out parent, commented:

There is really no reason to sit here for a test that’s not really grade appropriate, and they’re not getting the scores back early enough to use them, and they are told not to use them, so what’s the point?

Nadine, a White opt-out parent, simply stated, “It doesn’t count for anything.”

Six out of the eight opt-out parents in the Ashbury district were informed about the tests and were aware of at least one or two of the original goals of the opt-out movement’s agenda such as too many tests, not grade-appropriate, the drafting of the test, and the corporate and political intervention through district communications and social networks.

Lori, a White opt-out parent, was one parent in the sample who was knowledgeable about the origins of the opt-out movement when she shared, “I can articulate five or six reasons why I would opt out, but every time my husband and I would get into a discussion, I didn’t really hear a good reason why they should sit for the test.” Lori elaborated on her answer and said
other considerations were the drafting of the test and the fact that the scores come in too late to be used to drive instruction. Lori and her husband have the opt-out conversation each year to see if there is a viable reason to take the test but, so far, they are relying on the data from the NWEA, a computer-adapted test administered three times during the academic year that yields usable data that is informative to parents and educators to drive instruction.

**Tests Are Tied to Teacher Evaluations**

The third theme that surfaced from analyzing the interviews was parents’ aversion to having their teachers evaluated by their child’s test scores. In 2015, Governor Cuomo and the state legislature passed a law reforming teacher accountability by tying teacher evaluations to test scores, known as the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR; Amin, 2019). The annual teacher review would include the state test scores to evaluate teachers as highly effective, effective, developing, or ineffective (Amin, 2019). The use of a Value-Added Model (VAM) that includes the use of scores from high-stakes tests to evaluate teachers that “do not directly measure potential teachers’ contributions toward other student outcomes” was deemed an unreliable form of measure since there are factors outside of the classroom that are out of the teacher’s control (“Using Value-Added Models,” 2014, p. 2, 7). The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) unions mobilized (Shapiro, 2019). The unions banned together with parents to protest the use of test scores for teacher evaluations. The law, which became widely unpopular, disrupted school districts, drained budgets, and put unnecessary stress on the teachers and the students and ultimately sparked the opt-out movement. Further, many opposed the use of high-stakes testing for admission and tracking decisions (Shapiro, 2019).
Parents’ regard and respect for the Ashbury district’s teachers prompted them to opt out to support their teachers and the inappropriate use of the NYS ELA and math test scores to evaluate them. Brenda, a White opt-out parent, noted, “Probably my tippy-tippy top reason to opt out is the scores used to evaluate teachers.” Support for the teachers is also grounded in the fact that parents in the Ashbury district have family and friends who are teachers and show their solidarity to them by opting out. As Naomi, a white opt-out parent, explained, “I also grew up in a family of teachers. Right now, I am unwilling to participate in a system that uses an individual child’s testing to evaluate a teacher.”

At the elementary level, children spend close to six hours per day in school and the majority of that time with their classroom teacher. The relationship between teacher and student is crucial to the learning environment, and teachers threatened with losing their jobs based on their students’ test scores puts an unhealthy strain on the teacher and student relationship as well as unnecessary pressure on the tone of the classroom (Silfver, Sjöberg & Bagger, 2015). Janice, a White opt-out parent, supported these views from the research when she said, “Not to mention that it is all tied to teacher evaluations. I heard from my teacher friends, who are stressed, that they tell the students to do their best or they could lose their jobs.” The once supportive role of the teacher changed to a distant proctor of a test. As of April 2019, Governor Cuomo amended the law that used the NYS tests to evaluate teachers. The new law allows districts and their unions to determine which standardized test they will use for teacher evaluations (Hildebrand, 2019).

Butler School District: Reasons Parents Gave for Opting Out

According to the findings of this dissertation study, parents in the Butler district are not informed by the district about opting out, and the parents relied on family, friends, and
social media to gather their information. Superintendent Simmons does not send the message that the test is an invalid or unreliable instrument to measure student achievement. Parents are making their decision to opt out based on their findings and conclusions drawn from conversations with family, friends, and teachers, both in and out of the district, about opting out.

Too Much Stress, Pressure, and Anxiety

Out of the seven opt-out parents interviewed in the Butler district for this dissertation study, five said they opt out their child because of the stress and pressure of the tests. Kendra, a White opt-out parent, stated, “I don’t want my child to be under that pressure.” One of the changes made to the NYS tests in ELA and math is that they are no longer timed; students have unlimited time to take the tests, which means they could possibly take an entire day to complete one section of the test. Two parents said that sitting for that long to take the test would foster stress and anxiety. Brooke, a White opt-out parent, stated, “My son is not into academics and would be sitting all day to test. I think it’s setting him up even worse to fail because there’s pressure during and after the tests.” Henry, a White opt-out parent, also felt that there was no reason to stress out children for the tests. He concluded, “It’s [testing] just a source of angst.” The five parents who cited stress and anxiety explained that even with the minor adjustments the state has made to the tests—by removing the timed component, reducing the number of reading passages and questions on the ELA test, and testing for two days instead of three—these were not enough to alleviate stress and anxiety for their child, or to alter their point of view about opting out to opting in.

Parents of a child with an IEP are especially concerned with stress and anxiety connected to testing. As mentioned in Part One, an Individual Education Plan is designed to
meet academic goals and needs of a specific child. Parents are their child’s advocates, and a child with an IEP may need specific consideration. Leslie, a White opt-out parent, described her son’s experience:

He took it day one, came home a disaster crying. He couldn’t do it. It broke my heart.

That night I emailed the principal, and I said I’m really sorry to do this because an opt out is better than a score of a one or whatever. He has an IEP and the tests are torture for someone like him. Just torture.

Leslie said that she was not very informed when she made her decision to have her son take the test, and there was very little discussion or guidance from the district and the school to help her make a more rational choice for her son. Eliza, a White opt-out parent, confirmed Leslie’s claim about the lack of information given to them by the district and stated, “I opt my son out because my son has an IEP and the stress on my child.” She went on to say her son’s IEP status was a significant factor in her decision to research the opt-out movement and the tests. Based on her research, Eliza was able to make a decision that was the best for her child.

**The Test Does Not Count/No Reason to Take It**

Another concern that was stated as a reason to opt out for two of the five previously mentioned parents was the fact that the test does not count; therefore, there is no need to stress out their child. Once the resistance to high-stakes standardized testing gained momentum, the New York State Department of Education put a moratorium on the use of test scores to impose sanctions on teachers and schools, which was slated to end June 30, 2019. In November 2018, the moratorium extended to June 2020 (Amin, 2018). Henry, a White opt-out parent, pointed out:
They are not using it [test scores] as part of your kid’s grade, so you’re wasting their time. Come up with a reason for them to take the test. If they want us to participate in that test, then there needs to be some very real and clear communications as to the value the test holds for my child’s education.

Henry continued to say that he was getting a mixed message about the test scores and their purpose. He stated that if the district and the state want his child to participate in the tests, then there needs to be clear communication from the district and the state that explains the educational value of the tests for his child. Henry cited that neither the district nor the state has been able to give him that information.

Deciding to opt out, for some parents, is not an easy decision. As previously mentioned, while some parents who have a child with an IEP want to avoid the stress and anxiety the test may cause for their child, others would welcome standardized test scores as a baseline for their child’s academic achievement. Eliza, a White opt-out parent, who has a child with an IEP, said that she would like to see what her son scores and have that data. But Eliza emphasized, “Why make him go through the test when he has an IEP, and he is going to struggle on a test that does not affect his grades in any way?” However, parents said they would support a reliable and valid testing instrument that yields usable data. The data would give parents an objective snapshot of their child’s progress. To this end, the Butler district uses the NWEA, which is online and computer-adaptive. None of the nineteen parents interviewed in the Butler district opt out of the NWEA.

**Test Scores Are Tied to Teacher Evaluations**

The opt-out parents in the Butler district opted out based on what is best for their child, but their reasoning was not only focused on their child but also concerned about
teachers. The parents in the following category had a strong alliance with the teachers in the Butler district and were not supportive of their child being used to evaluate them. Five out of the seven opt-out parents in the Butler district cited test scores tethered to teacher evaluations as their main reason for opting out. One parent who opted out wanted to have their child participate in the NYS testing only if it yielded information about their child, and it was used to drive future instruction instead of evaluating teachers. Will, a White opt-out parent, expressed, “If it is based off of knowing what he knows, then I would probably keep him in instead of using the tests to evaluate teachers.” As stated at the beginning of this section for the Butler district, Superintendent Simmons and Principal Owens mentioned there are a number of district parents who are teachers, and parents are doing their research for information about opting out and speaking with teacher friends and family. Jason, a White opt-out parent, shared:

It was a stance for teachers. We have family and friends who are teachers, and just speaking with them, it just doesn’t seem fair. Our decision to opt out is the effect of what it would say to our teachers.

Interestingly, parents interviewed who do opt out due to test scores tied to teacher evaluations, are not teachers but have strong empathy for their family and friends who are teachers as well as their district teachers.

When determining fairness in the teacher evaluation scenario, Brooke, a White opt-out parent, was “appalled” that this “ridiculous test” is used to evaluate teachers. She was impassioned when she asserted:

A kid who doesn’t have breakfast in the morning, a kid who doesn’t have access to breakfast in the morning. A kid who is having issues at home that we couldn’t even
fathom, they’re supposed to come in and sit through this test and do the absolute best and score a four on this test. We know that’s impossible and how is that an effective measure for evaluating teachers?

Henry, a White opt-out parent, stated that his “top of the line reason” for opting out was the test scores used for teacher evaluations. In his own words, “I’m sorry, but my 10-year-old is not qualified to evaluate her teacher. It doesn’t matter what the damn test says; it’s not what they’re going to school for.” He went on to say that focusing on the test is “wasting their time” and continued to state, “There are other things that they should be teaching. My son can’t sign his name; he cannot write his name in script.” Henry addressed a critical component of the opt-out movement and the broader resistance to standardized testing—narrowing the curriculum to focus solely on tested subjects is done at the detriment of the students and the teachers (Nichols & Berliner, 2007).

**Culvert School District: Reasons Parents Gave for Opting Out**

For this section, five out of sixteen parents interviewed for this study opted their child out of the NYS tests. Parents in the Culvert district, as described above, do not receive information from the district about their right to opt out of the tests to help them make an informed decision for their child. Parents are left with the responsibility for gathering information about the opt-out movement, and this was reflected in their decision making. Four out of the five parents who opted out consulted family, friends, news media, Internet, or social media to gather information about the opt-out movement and their right to opt out their child from the tests.
Too Much Pressure

Four out of the five opt-out parents interviewed cited stress and anxiety as their number one reason for opting out. Jenna, a Latina opt-out parent, said, “My daughter is smarter than my son; he is an average student. Comparing both of them, these tests are stressful, so I didn’t want to be frustrating my son.” In the end, Jenna opted out her son from the tests based on the stress and pressure he would feel taking the tests. Valentina, a Latina opt-out parent, shared that her fifth-grade daughter was stressed from the onset of the testing back in the third grade. Valentina expressed:

It is the stress that comes along with it when it’s time to take the test. When my daughter first started the testing, she was stressed out. How can she do good on a test if she is stressed out?

Valentina went on to share that her daughter is a good student and on the honor roll, but the period prior to the tests was too stressful, so she opted her out. When it was time for her third-grade son to take the tests, he exhibited signs of stress leading up to the test dates; she opted him out too.

Parents were vocal about their concerns that students today are expected to take a number of tests during the school year above and beyond regular classroom assessments. The NYS testing for ELA and math begins in the third grade, and some parents expressed that this is too much testing for their child’s developmental stage. Helena, a Latina opt-out parent, voiced her concern for her child and stated, “I thought it was too much pressure on a kid at that age, and I feel like they’re just taking a test to label the school.” Helena continued to state that she had to do her own research on opting out, and she discovered that the tests were used to rate schools and school districts. As mentioned earlier, the administration in the
Culvert district wants to be in compliance with NYS and raise their test scores as not to draw any unwanted scrutiny.

Returning to the subtheme of parents as advocates for their child, parents expressed strong beliefs about the appropriateness of testing at a young age. They also described that they were the best equipped to make decisions about what their child’s capacities were at each grade level and argued for their rights to make these decisions as their child’s advocate. Nia, a Black opt-out parent, agreed, “I know the lengths in what my son is capable of doing in school, so I just thought it’s a lot of pressure for them.” Nia decided that it was unnecessary to inflict this level of stress on her son, especially at third grade.

**The Test Does Not Count**

For parents conducting their own research on opting out, a primary concern is trying to understand why schools are giving these tests if teachers cannot use them for anything academic. The parents who opted out due to unnecessary stress and anxiety questioned the reasons for the tests. Jenna, a Latina opt-out parent, opted her child out due to the stress of the tests, but she also cited knowing the tests did not count as a factor in her decision making. Jenna expressed, “At the end of the day, it doesn’t count, so to me, it’s like worthless.” Helena, a Latina opt-out parent, also gave stress and anxiety as her number one reason but also supported her decision stating, “If my kid doesn’t require this test to pass, why should they take it?” The fact that the test is not required to move on to the next grade reinforced some parents in making their decision to opt out under the guise there is no good reason to take it.

Parents who are doing their due diligence and asking questions about the testing process and the opt-out movement are asking the question—What is the point of the test?
Nia, a Black opt-out parent, deemed the test “pointless” stating, “I don’t really see the point in taking it. What’s the point of the test?” Valentina, a Latina opt-out parent, questioned the importance of the test, saying, “It doesn’t seem like it affects his grades. So what is the importance of the test if we can say I am not going to let him take the test?” The five opt-out parents in the Culvert district opted out by calculating the stress to their child balanced by the lack of negative consequences if they opted out. The opt-out parents in the reported sample have children that are smart or on the honor roll—these are the same type of students that Superintendent Iams referred to that would earn the 3’s and 4’s on the test, which comprise the opt-out population in the Culvert district.

**Too Much Test Prep**

One of the major talking points of the opt-out movement was the inordinate amount of time spent on test prep prior to the tests, which both limited instructional time and narrowed the curriculum. Further, pressure was put on schools to earn high test scores to avoid school closures and teacher terminations (Croft, Roberts, & Stenhous, 2018). The focus on boosting test scores, especially in low-income Latinx and Black neighborhoods, led to over-reliance on corporate test prep materials over teacher-created imaginative and developmentally appropriate learning (Carlson-Paige, 2014). In the Culvert district, Superintendent Iams believed the district spends “too much time” on test prep. Iams stated:

> I’ve always said even when I was still in the classroom, and as an assistant superintendent, you don’t have to do a full week of test prep where the students are just answering questions over and over again if you taught what you needed to teach throughout the entire school year.
Iams continued to say that because Culvert is an underperforming district when compared to neighboring high-performing districts, the teachers and administrators feel the need to do test prep to boost scores. Au (2016b) claimed that the neoliberal agenda uses public funds to purchase preparatory test materials from profit-seeking corporations. Principal Jones explained that about 20% of the teaching from October to December is teaching skills that are on the tests. Then in January, Principal Jones said test prep consists of workbooks, coach books, *Measuring-Up* books, and 50-60% of class time is spent on test prep. Inevitably, according to Condron (2011), lower-performing schools have the overwhelming task to boost test scores and with the inequality of resource distribution, teaching to the test is the only practical way to yield higher test scores. Thus, a test prep industry is perpetuated, draining funds for workbooks and other materials from school districts that can least afford them.

The opt-out movement took a stand against narrowing the curriculum where non-tested subjects were sacrificed for just the tested subjects of ELA and math. In addition, special area subjects like art, music, and recess were also sacrificed to make more time for test prep. Principal Jones explained, “In January there is a bit more skill and drill.” In a further explanation, Principal Jones said the teachers use stories from past tests and the directives from the reading series and combine the two as practice and teaching various skills. Test prep materials are used in some classes more than others. Jones clarified, “I’ve seen certain teachers on certain grade levels just focus on the tests, but then I’ve also seen teachers utilize the reading series and math materials to accomplish the same thing.” When I asked if any special content classes or non-tested subjects were sacrificed for test prep, Jones answered, “No, not at all.” As for narrowing the curriculum, parents interviewed were asked the same question, and all of the 16 parents confirmed Principal Jones’ answer.
Three out of the five opt-out parents in the Culvert district stated the overabundance of test prep as a reason to opt out. Deshawna, a Black opt-out parent, described how the teacher sent home packets of work to practice for the tests explaining, “I felt like they were just preparing the kids for one test.” The overuse of instructional time spent on test prep, an argument made by the opt-out movement, was evident in parents’ attitudes in Culvert. All three parents that opted out and two parents that opted in cited the over-reliance on test prep materials as a stressor for their children, as well as the relentless focus on the test. Alma, a Latina opt-in parent, commented, “Sometimes the test prep was homework all related to the test. It was as if that was all they were doing in school. It felt like a lot because that’s all my daughter would talk about.” Alma explained that her daughter took the test without incident, but the buildup before the test was disproportionate and unnecessary. Ayana, a Black opt-in parent, also had an issue with the test prep being too much. She shared, “I don’t like the fact that when March hits, it’s all about the test until the test.” Parents that opted in their child were not against test prep per se; however, they were against the excessive focus on the test and prep.

Parents who were against the test prep generally felt that the excessive focus on test scores produced student stress and that the classroom time spent on test prep was educationally inappropriate. The experiences described by the parents of Culvert support the literature, which states that districts in low-income communities focus on raising test scores to close achievement gaps at the expense of lessons that foster collaboration and higher-order thinking (Au, 2015). A clear theme that emerged in this research was that the Ashbury district had the highest opt-out rates and the lowest emphasis on test prep, but the Butler district had medium opt-out rates and some emphasis on test prep, and the Culvert district
had the lowest opt-out rates and the highest emphasis on test prep. The resources diverted to test prep as related to achievement would be an interesting subject for future research.

In sum, there is more structured test prep, often sold and packaged by corporate interests related to the testing companies, in schools that serve the low SES, Latinx, and Black communities. Critics, such as many among the opt-out movement, education scholars, and some parents in this study, argue that the overemphasis on standardized tests is not an effective strategy for closing the opportunity gap (Koretz, 2017; Vasquez Helig, Marachi, & Cruz, 2016). Rather, research shows that culturally relevant and multicultural curricula arts programs and curricula that engage students in robust problem solving and critical thinking fosters independent thinking and creates life-long learners (Hagopian, 2016).

On the other hand, there are parents in the Ashbury, Butler, and Culvert districts who opt in for the tests. They cited their reasons as testing is a part of life, and there was nothing to lose by taking the tests. They also wanted to know their child’s abilities, and if their child generally performs well on tests. Parents in the Ashbury district gave their children the decision-making power by opening up a dialogue with their child to determine his or her comfort level for taking the tests. In the following section, is an elaboration of these findings as the parents tell their story.

**Ashbury School District: Reasons Parents Gave for Opting In**

Not all parents in the Ashbury district are opting out. Although the Ashbury district has opt-out rates of over 50%, nine out of 17 parents interviewed opted in to the NYS ELA and math tests. Parents are informed about the tests, and they are aware of the opt-out movement through district forums, PTA meetings, and social networks. Parents are also aware of their right to opt out, and they understand that the district respects their right to
choose what is best for their child. However, this group of parents in the Ashbury district opted in their child to the tests. In the following section, is a detailed account of the parents from the Ashbury district and their decision to opt in their child.

**Testing is a Part of Life/Nothing to Lose**

Being prepared for life and future tests was a strong theme that emerged in the analysis of opt-in parents in the Ashbury district. Parents in the opt-in group believed that, as one parent said, “testing is a part of life” that prepares students for the skills to take tests in the future. For example, Carol, a White opt-in parent, firmly stated, “I think in life you have to learn how to take tests.” Lidia, a Latina opt-in parent, expressed, “In middle school and high school, he’s gonna have to take other standardized tests, and he may not have a choice to opt out for a lot of these tests.”

Another theme across the opt-in parent group was that taking tests is practice for future tests without any consequences. Madeline, a White opt-in parent, pointed out, “My view of the state tests is extra practice for my kids and they’re going to be taking tests a whole lot. I think it’s good practice.” Talia, a White opt-in parent, echoed Madeline’s view that the future will bring more tests into their child’s lives and testing is “something we do in school.” Other parents felt that due to the fact that the test scores do not have a purpose, they have nothing to lose by taking the tests. MaryAnn, a White opt-in parent, noted, “We think it can’t hurt them. It’s not going against any of their grades and in life, you’re going to be tested, and it gives them practice.” The reality of testing in life and the belief in practice without ramifications drives some of the opt-in parents’ decisions.

According to some opt-in parents in the Ashbury district, testing is a part of life and building their child’s resilience are factors in their decision. These parents who opt in believe
that children need to understand that their grades are just numbers that do not define them as individuals and for their future. They stressed that life is full of evaluations and tests, and not all of them are easy or perfect. Linda, a White opt-in parent, supported this view stating:

I know that the students are going to have to get used to test conditions regardless of the assessment. This is going to happen in life, and not everything is going to come easy. We also want our children to learn that if they get a three or a four, it’s just a number.

Opt-in parents that supported testing as a part of life and testing skills as a necessity also brought up their own experience taking tests. Farrah, a White opt-in parent, maintained, “We took tests. We grew up taking tests; you just take it.” Sandra, a White opt-in parent, supported test-taking and concluded, “Taking tests is a skill we all had to learn. The more you do it, the better you get at it.” Parents who opt-in in the Ashbury district want their child prepared with the skills and endurance they will need to take Regents exams and the SAT. With “nothing to lose,” these parents believed that taking the NYS ELA and math tests gives their child practice without consequences.

Their Child’s Abilities

Another theme that emerged from the data analyses for opt-in parents was their consideration for their child’s abilities. As part of the decision-making process, parents wanted to know how their child was doing academically; therefore, that is why they had him/her take the test. Madeline, a White opt-in parent explained:

If I had kids that had difficulty, maybe I would opt out. But my kids don’t have test anxiety. They perform well in school. So, for me, it doesn’t seem that I should opt out just because of political reasons.
This was an interesting comment, because only five out of 52 parents interviewed for this study mentioned the political aspect of the opt-out movement, but they did not cite it as their main reason for opting out. Surprising, only a total of four parents out of the 17 interviewed in the Ashbury district brought up the topic of politics. The distinct academic attributes of children, such as academic motivation, as identified by parents in this study, were factors related to testing decision making. The values of the parents in this category included fostering competition and encouraging taking challenges. Kalie, a White opt-in parent, stated, “I make my decision to opt in based on my child. Honestly, my kids are both academics. They’re both very engaged in school. They’re very performance-driven. The academics is the prize alone.” As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Principal Strauss encouraged parents to have their child take the tests if they want to take them, and if they do not exhibit any stress or anxiety.

The findings overwhelmingly showed that parents in the Ashbury district chose to opt out or opt in to the NYS tests based on the individual academic and personality attributes of their child only. Doing what is best for your child is a consideration in the decision-making process, as stated by Lidia, a Latinx opt-in parent, who noted, “It’s what is best for my child, and it may not be what’s best for everybody else’s.” Few parents considered this topic in depth and acted as individuals rather than members of a political movement.

Some parents opted in because they were “turned off” by the opt-out parents and their messages on social media. Farrah, a White opt-in parent, recounted that the Ashbury Moms Facebook page posted a tremendous amount of information encouraging parents to opt out stating it was “child abuse” to have them take the tests. She went on to say that it put the children in the middle and it became—“Who’s opting out? Who’s not? Why do I have to
take the test? Why doesn’t so and so have to take the test?” Farrah believed it was her
“individual decision” to make and not her child’s, and the one-sided information she received via her Facebook led her to delete the page. Parents’ decision making appeared to be impacted not just by the district information disseminated but in the case of Farrah, by her reaction to the information she attained via social media.

**Child as a Voice in the Decision-Making Process**

There were parents in the Ashbury district who believed that having a conversation with their child about the tests and stating the pros and cons as well as their desire for them to take the test was the best way to make a comfortable decision. Parents in this group welcomed the opportunity to have this conversation with their child to explain their reasons why they wanted him or her to opt into the tests. It also gave their child a voice in the decision-making process and to discuss any information they heard from their peers. Carol, a White opt-in parent, stated she was so confused with all of the information she received from the district forum that she decided to have a conversation with her fourth and fifth grader. She said she presented both sides of the issue and voiced her reasons for wanting them to take the tests and asked them both, “What do you want to do?” Carol went on to state, “If you are educated, you know. But I always based my choice on how my kids felt about taking it.” Even with all the information she received from the district, ultimately, the final choice was in the hands of her children who decided to take the tests.

Another mother, Talia, a White opt-in parent, shared, “By the time her children were ready to take the test, the opt-out talk was minimal, and due to the moratorium on the test scores, they were not used to evaluate teachers and were not used for any specific decisions about her children.” When her children confronted her about not taking the tests, she
presented her facts, listened to their side of the argument, and, in the end, they took the tests. Linda, a White opt-in parent, pointed out, “Just being able to have the conversation [with her children] from the ground up at the elementary level was less threatening because once they get to middle school and certainly the high school, it’s a whole different level of stakes.” She said she was honest and open with her daughter and influenced her to take the tests.

The Ashbury district with a high opt-out rate, made it prevalent for the fourth and fifth-grade children to question their parents about opting out because most of their friends were doing it. MaryAnn, a White opt-in parent, said her son came home and stated he heard he did not have to take the tests and said he did not want to take them. Although she told him, “Well, you are,” it also presented the opportunity to have a discussion about the tests and why she and her husband felt it was not a problem to take them since they did not count toward their grades or promotion. Farrah, a White opt-in parent, had a similar type of encounter with her children when they questioned why they had to take the tests if other children were not taking them. Farrah explained, “I told them you will have to take Regent tests in the middle and high school, and you cannot opt out of those tests.” She went on to tell them to think of the NYS ELA and math tests as practice and whatever you score does not matter. Both MaryAnn and Farrah did take their child’s concerns into consideration and explained their reasoning, which put their child at ease.

Parents Who Chose to Opt Out and Opt In

Not all decisions are easily made and for some of the parents in the Ashbury district, they made the decision to opt out of one test and opted in to the other. Parents in this category made the split decision based on their child’s abilities and are an anomaly in the Ashbury data. Madeline, a White opt-in parent of a fourth-grader, opted her daughter out of
the ELA test in the third grade based solely on what she heard from her teacher friends about the test. Madeline explained, “I heard through the grapevine that the ELA test had a lot of written responses, reading and answering, and that it could be stressful for the kids. So, I chose to opt her out of that test.” Madeline continued to say that her daughter was mad at her because she wanted to take the tests. This year, 2019, in fourth grade, her daughter took all of the tests. Lidia, a Latinx opt-in parent of a fifth-grader, opted her son out of ELA for third and fourth grade because he had weak ELA skills. Lidia said, “He is very strong in math while reading and writing is not his strongest suit.” Lidia went on to explain that she wanted her son to be confident and comfortable. She agreed on the premise that her son’s reading and writing skills would improve and then he will sit in for the ELA test. He took the tests this year, 2019, in the fifth grade.

Parents in the Butler district that opted out did so with their child and teacher’s best interest in mind. In the following section, the opt-in parents in the Butler district did so for the following reasons: (a) taking tests is part of life, (b) want a baseline of their child’s performance, and (c) their child wants to take the test.

**Butler School District: Reasons Parents Gave for Opting In**

Twelve out of 19 parents in the Butler district interviewed for this study opted in their child to the tests. Nine of the 12 parents cited testing is a part of life and you cannot opt out of life as their number-one reason to opt in. For some of the parents in this category, their views are modeled after their education experiences and their experiences with testing in their careers.
Taking Tests is Part of Life

In New York State, there are many academic and job opportunities that require a form of testing to qualify for either entrance to a school or university or to attain a job position. For example, entrance to a private high school requires an entrance exam, and entrance into a college or a university usually require SAT or ACT exams. In New York State, high school students have to take Regents exams to graduate. For those entering certain professions such as teaching, medicine, law, and accounting, licensing exams are required. Mary, a White opt-in parent, argued, “They have to take SATs to go to college, so why not let them start practicing.” Mary echoed the argument of opt-in parents in the Ashbury district that there is “nothing to lose” by taking the tests, and they are practice. For Mary, the grades are not the focus of the tests; what was important is that her child attains the test-taking skills and resilience. Steve, a White opt-in parent, expressed a similar view stating, “We’re prepping our children for tests. You get tested all the time, so unless you’re going to change the social ideology in this country, we’re prepping them for what’s going to come.” Out of the 12 opt-in parents interviewed in the Butler district, nine cited that “testing is a part of life” and that students could get practice with “nothing to lose” as their main reason for opting in their child into the NYS ELA and math tests. This was essentially the same argument given by parents in the Ashbury district and reflected a particular set of values or as Steve said above, “an ideology” contributed to their decision to opt their child into the tests.

Parents who opted their child in to the tests shared the belief that testing is a part of the process of education and taking the NYS tests is just another aspect of the process. Marci, a Black opt-in parent, stressed that she chose to have her daughter take the test because, “I am trying to prepare her for the future.” Whether it is a classroom test or a standardized test,
parents in this category are likeminded and believe that testing is a skill and a part of life. Yamilla, a Latina opt-in parent, shared that she wants her children prepared for what is to come and not be “surprised” when they have to take a required Regents exam. The nine parents who believed that testing is a part of life all stated that you could not opt out of any other tests but the NYS tests. Natalie, a White opt-in parent, emphasized, “You can’t opt out of life. You want to go to college, you need your SAT or ACT as part of admission requirements.” Preparing for the future is a major concern for the opt-in parents.

Another concern that fueled this group of parents’ decision to opt in is their negative opinion of “helicopter parenting” (Rosenfeld, 2016, para. 7). The literature supports what Rosenfeld (2016) deemed a “coddling epidemic” in young children where overprotective parents stymie the independence and self-reliance of their child by making decisions that protect them from anything and everything that they deem uncomfortable (para. 12). Olivia, a White opt-in parent, remarked, “I feel you have to take a test in everything in life such as, getting a license, being a doctor, or a lawyer. There will be tests in college and at the workplace.” She went on to say she told her child to do his best and removed the “high-stakes” label from the testing scenario. Olivia asserted that she was angry that there is even the option to opt out and claimed parents who opt their children out are “making them into wimps” that lack coping skills and resilience. Parents in this category believed that as students progress in their academic careers, the required curriculum and workload will increase, and so will the number of tests they will take on a regular basis. Tina, a White opt-in parent, expressed, “I believe life gets tougher and children need to learn the skills necessary to sit for a specific amount of time and take a test.” The values that drove the decision making of this group of parents were that (a) children need to be prepared to take a
test because it is a required part of life, and (b) opting out children was a form of coddling that could lead to a lack of resilience.

**Test Scores as a Baseline of a Child’s Performance**

Two of the opt-in parents choose to opt in because they want to see the scores to gauge how their child is performing as compared to other students in their grade and to compare their child’s test scores to their classroom performance. Olivia, a White opt-in parent, pointed out, “I want to see how my child is doing in school.” She further explained that the report card is a subjective report and sitting for a standardized test yielded more objective information and some hidden skills that needed attention. Tina, a White opt-in parent, stated:

I think it is good to have a baseline. I think that’s important. As a parent, my kids sat and took the tests for about two to three hours tells me how they did compared to the rest of the U.S.

Testing as a part of life, building resilience, and attaining a performance baseline, was not the amplified message of the Butler district’s administration. Yet it was the reasons expressed by these two parents to opt their children into the NYS tests.

**Child Wants to Take the Tests**

Two of the opt-in parents I interviewed in the Butler district want their child to be challenged and be able to meet a challenge and not focus on the scores, but for them, it is another piece of data in their child’s academic portfolio. Brittany, a White opt-in parent, shared, “He’s very competitive. He wants to take the tests.” Brittany also said that the alternative to sit in a room and read for however long the test runs “would drive him crazy.” Brittany said even with peer pressure, her son did not want to opt out. Beverly, a White opt-
in parent, asserted, “She’s a really good test taker. She does well. She didn’t feel any pressure.” In sum, other factors driving the decision making of opt-in parents in the Butler district were that their children did not find the tests stressful and that they understood the unique qualities of their children.

**Parents Who Chose to Opt Out and Opt In**

Some of the parents in the Butler district are exercising their right to opt their child out of one of the tests based on their child’s abilities and their child having a voice in the decision making. Kendra, a White opt-out/opt-in parent of a fourth-grader, said, “I discuss it [taking the tests] with him. He can tell me when he feels good. If he feels good about taking the tests, he wants to take the tests, he’ll take them.” Kendra went on to say that her son opted out of the math in the third grade because of weak math skills. This year, 2019, in the fourth grade, he took the ELA and science tests and opted out of math. For Marci, a Black opt-out/opt-in parent of a fifth-grader, she also opted her daughter out of math since the third grade. Marci said, “She likes science and English, but math she struggles a little, so I don’t bother with it.” Marci continued to say that because the tests do not count, there is no reason to put her through the pressure of the math test. Marci stated, “If she says I don’t wanna do it, you don’t have to do it.”

Henry, a White opt-out parent of a fourth-grader, who was outspoken and passionate about opting his son out of the ELA and math, opted him into the science test. Henry said, “My son took the science test because his teacher said that he would have a lot of fun, he would enjoy it. It’s a hands-on test and my son, he’s into science.” Henry also stated that he was aware the tests do not count, but the majority of the class was taking it and he did not want to separate his son from his class to sit and read. Leslie, a White opt-out/opt-in parent
of a fifth-grader, also opted her son in last year to the science test, but opts him out of the ELA and the math. As mentioned earlier in this section, Leslie’s son has an IEP and attempted to take the tests in the third grade; he had a difficult time and came home distraught. Leslie explained, “The science I let him take. It’s fun and hands-on, and it’s only given in the fourth and eighth-grade.” This year, 2019, her fifth-grade son opted out of the ELA and math. Parents are exercising their right to opt their child out of the tests and for some of the parents in the Butler district, their child has a voice in the decision, and the subject tested, along with the child’s skills in the subject, plays a major role in the choice parents made for their child.

Most parents in the Culvert district opted in to the tests. There were 11 opt-in parents interviewed in the Culvert district for this study who decided to opt in for the following reasons: (a) testing is a part of education and fosters good test-taking skills, (b) data as a baseline of their child’s performance, and (c) their child is capable of taking the test. The next section tells the story, through the voices of the parents, why they opted in, and what variables were considered for their decision.

**Culvert School District: Reasons Parents Gave for Opting In**

In the Culvert School District, 11 out of 16 parents interviewed for this study opted in their child to the NYS tests. Of those parents that opted in, all but one was not aware of the option to opt out. Although the majority of opt in parents in the Culvert district were aware of their option to opt out, half of them were not versed on the issues of the opt-out movement.

**Develop Good Test-Taking Skills**

Opt-in parents said they wanted their child to be successful in school and in the future. One parent stated that school is their child’s “job.” Jada, a Black opt-in parent, stated,
“I have no problem with the test. I’m like, ‘Test my kid.’” Jada went on to explain, “The way I look at it is the kids have nothing really to do besides go to school and do schoolwork. Taking the test is good practice.” Parents opt in because they want their child to develop good test-taking skills because as a child progresses from grade to grade, there are tests that they must take. Deja, a Black opt-in parent, confirmed, “I have no problem with it. It’s another tool they use for the children to sharpen their test-taking skills.” Deja continued to say that in the future, there will be the Regents, SATs, ACTs, and other tests that her child will be required to take and opting out of those tests is not an option. Carlos, a Latino opt-in parent, felt that his son should take the tests to develop his test-taking skills, “We want him to take the test. That way if they do it once and they’re a little lost, next year they can come up and learn more about it.” Carlos believed that practice was important to develop good test-taking skills. For these parents, the strong role the tests play in their child’s long-term academic success is paramount. Providing support and conscientious parenting that encourages their child to do their best drove their decision to opt their child in for the NYS tests.

**Test Scores as a Baseline of Their Child’s Performance**

Out of the 16 parents interviewed in the Culvert district, 11 of them are opt-in parents and five out of the 11 wanted their child to take the test to have another piece of information about their child’s performance. Parents wanted to confirm the accuracy of the report card with the test scores. Javier, a Latino opt-in parent, wanted to use the tests to reveal any disparity in his son’s learning when he stated, “I thought it was a good idea to make him take the test because that way we can see where his lowest subject is.” For Javier, his son was doing his homework and going to school every day, but the test was a way to see how much
he has learned. Luciana, a Latina opt-in parent, also wanted objective data from the tests to see how well her son was doing academically. She stated, “He is working in school, and I want to know is a good student or not a good student. The teacher say you son [your son] do good or no good. No, no, no.” For Luciana, relying solely on the teacher’s assessment of her son was not enough.

Parents also want their children to take the tests to see how they compare to other students in their age group. Deja, a Black opt-in parent, posited, “I don’t see anything wrong with it though. It tells me where my son is at compared to others.” Parents interviewed wanted to know if their child needed support in a specific academic area, as sometimes a weakness may go undetected in a classroom setting. Ayana, a Black opt-in parent, believed that taking the tests would reveal information sooner rather than later, she stressed, “I feel it’s important to have the scores. That way if there’s any hiccups, I can catch it ASAP and address it and not wait for a bigger problem.” She further stated, “I would like to see her yearly gauge on what’s going on.” Although the test report does not reveal diagnostic information, parents who opt in believed that having their child’s scores was as important as other sources of information about their child (e.g., grades). Consequently, opt-in parents believed having objective, standardized data aided in helping them gauge their child’s success in school and to provide their child with any necessary support. Although the test scores come back after their child has moved to the next grade, parents interviewed were seeking additional information about their child and their child’s performance.

**The Child is Capable of Taking the Tests**

The literature showed that some Black and Latinx immigrant parents with low SES opt in for the data to reveal inequities to attain the needed resources to close the achievement
gap (Harris, 2015; Wang, 2017). Imani, a Black opt-in parent, shared her story that when she was in high school in Baltimore, she was told, “SATs are not for Black people.” She questioned the complexity of testing and underlying systemic racism, wondering, “Is this made for me specifically to fail?” Imani explained that for her, access to tests was fraught with historical meaning and that she opted her daughter in to prove, “Hey, we stand a chance.”

When the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2002 allowed for assigning letter grades to public schools based on student test scores, a widespread closing of failing public schools followed. With the nationwide opportunity gap between White, Black, Latinx, Asian, Native Americans, ELLs, and special education students, a majority of schools closed were in low SES neighborhoods, particularly in New York and Chicago (Tisley, 2017). Further, widely publicized incidents occurred wherein some schools at high risk of being closed, students likely to score poorly, most often Black students, were sent home or to a non-testing classroom during the testing time so that their needs were not exposed (Klein, 2016). The publicity of these incidents, as well as the historically racist educational policies that often steered minority children from the college-prep track and traditional gatekeeping entry points such as SAT tests, inform the decision making of parents like Imani. For Black parents, opting in to the NYS testing is a stance against racist educational policies, and their child’s test scores represents being counted and not discounted.

Parents in this category attempted to make the best decisions for their child, knowing with confidence that the outcome was going to be positive. Parents who opted in their child to the NYS ELA and math tests did so knowing their child would be able to sit and endure the testing environment. For Camilla, a Latina opt-in parent, her daughter’s experience with
peer pressure challenged her decision to do what she felt was best for her child. Camilla shared, “She’s okay [not nervous]. I say, yes, you okay to take the test.” Camilla based her decision on her daughter’s classroom performance.

Anita, a Latina opt-in parent, shared, “My child is capable of taking the test, so I’m okay with it.” However, Anita commented that if her child was struggling and having a difficult time, she would have opted her out because there would not be any benefits to taking the test under duress. Alma, a Latina opt-in parent, remarked, “I could have kept her home or opted her out, but she was comfortable taking the test.” Alma felt that as long as her daughter was not stressed or overwhelmed, there was no valid reason, in her mind, to opt her out. Parents in the Culvert district that opted in their child because they were not stressed or anxious about the test agreed that if the scenario were the opposite, they would have opted them out.

Parents in the Culvert School district that opt in their children are doing so for a holistic picture of their child’s performance. With high expectations for their child’s educational future, parents are exercising their rights to ensure their child has access to a quality education. For them, the test scores teamed with report cards and teacher comments provide them with the needed information to facilitate their child’s educational success.

Parents in each of the three districts in this study have some common threads that run through their decisions to opt out or opt in their child to the NYS ELA and math tests.

**Parents Who Chose to Opt Out and Opt In**

In the Culvert School district, one of the reasons parents opted in was to get a baseline of their child’s academic progress and to weed out any weaknesses in their ELA or math skills. For Dashawna, a Black opt-out parent of a fourth-grader, having the objective
data for math was important to her. In the third grade, her daughter took the math and opted out of the ELA. Dashawna stated, “My youngest daughter took the math part last year [third grade]. The teacher was telling me she was having some issues in math, so that’s why I wanted her to take the test.” Ironically, her daughter scored above average, and Dashawna was wondering why she was told her daughter was having trouble in math when she scored high on the test. It gave her the information she needed to know about her daughter, and she has opted her daughter out of the state tests since. Nia, a Black opt-out parent of a fifth-grader, opted her son out of the ELA test when he first came to the Culvert district in the fourth grade. Nia emphasized, “I let him take the math, that was his choice.” Nia went on to say her son likes school, and she allows him to make the choice. Nia explained to her son, “It’s not solely my decision because you’re the one that has to take it.” She respected his choice and this year, 2019, he took only the math test.

**Cross-Case Comparison**

As mentioned, there is a significant disparity between the demographics of parents who opt out and opt in to the NYS ELA and math tests in grades three to eight. After examining the literature on the opt-out movement, two questions arose—How do parents make their decision? And why they opt out or opt in? The findings of this study revealed differences between the three districts in the study for the reasons parents gave for opting out or opting in their child to the NYS ELA and math tests. For those parents that chose to opt out, all three districts cited reasons that the tests caused unnecessary stress and anxiety. This was also the reason that Jeanette Deutermann (2014), founder of the Long Island Opt-Out Info, gave for opting out when her son was visibly ill and upset about the upcoming state tests and refused to go to school.
Why Parents Opt Out

In Ashbury, there is a startling lack of politically based decision making, considering the political aspects of the tests. Surprisingly, parents made more individual decisions based on their child rather than as being a part of a political movement. Opting out is political and Ashbury has the highest opt-out rate, but politics was a byproduct of their decision and not a direct consideration that drove their choice to opt out their child. Ashbury has a high opt-out rate and low stakes for the tests.

For the Butler district, another major issue that drove the opt-out movement was the use of tests scores to evaluate teacher performance. For the Butler district, teacher evaluations were a key reason for parents to opt out as an act of solidarity for their teachers. The state placed a moratorium on the use of test scores for evaluating students and teachers after the backlash and the overwhelming number of test refusals across the state. Butler reports a medium opt-out rate and has medium stakes for the tests.

In the Culvert district, parents opted out because of the stress and pressure of the tests that do not count. Culvert reports a low opt-out rate but has high stakes. Low proficiency and low performance on the tests puts the Culvert district in the position to raise the test scores to avoid state scrutiny. Culvert, unlike Butler and Ashbury, cannot afford to have a sustainable opt-out movement in their district because a greater majority of their funding comes from state aid. Also, the superintendent of the Culvert district wants to remain in compliance with the state in an effort to avoid state scrutiny or intervention.

Another reason that resonated among parents from the three districts was that the tests do not count and the scores are not used to drive instruction. Parents having the right to opt out their child from the tests sends the message that this test is not used to make any
academic decisions. Interestingly, the knowledge that the tests do not count not only drive parents to opt out but also encourages parents to have their child opt into the tests as practice without negative consequences.

Among the many talking points of the opt-out movement was the overuse of test prep in lieu of critical-thinking lessons and the sacrifice of other subjects not tested. Narrowing the curriculum to just the tested subjects of ELA and math with the goal to raise test scores in underserved communities was deemed by Au (2015) as an “induced curricular and pedagogic squeeze” (p. 52). This study found that only the Culvert parents gave this as a reason for opting out. Depending on the teacher, Culvert students were confronted with skill-and-drill lessons to prepare them for the state tests.

In the Culvert district, which enrolls mostly low-income students of color, tests scores are on the lower end of the score grid; Culvert has a higher percentage of Level 1 scores at 30-40% as compared to Ashbury at 1-10% and Butler at 20-30%. Culvert had the lowest opt-out rate and the highest emphasis on test prep. Hence, one of the reasons why parents in the Culvert district opt out of the testing is due to the overabundance of test prep in exchange for engaging lessons that foster critical thinking and collaboration among the students. Although parents in the Culvert district complained that their children engaged in test prep at the start of the new year up until the testing dates using workbooks and other purchased test preparatory materials, they did say that it was not in exchange for recess, physical education or any other special content classes or non-tested subjects. In addition, there were some parents that did complain about the test prep but opted their child into the tests, citing the same reason, but made a different choice.
When analyzing the findings for parents that opted out their child for the NYS tests, SES and race/ethnicity were key factors. For the Ashbury district with a predominantly White, middle-class population, the stakes attached to the tests are low. Ashbury had the highest opt-out rate and the lowest emphasis on test prep. Since Ashbury is a high performing district with proficiency rates of 60-70% and a 99% graduation rate, the district is not in any danger of state scrutiny (NYSED, 2018b, 2018c). Parents have the resources and the knowledge to advocate for their child, to be proactive in the school community, and the ability to voice their concerns with nothing to lose.

However, in the Culvert district, the stakes attached to the tests are high. Culvert’s most prevalent population is Latinx and has a lower SES than both Ashbury and Butler. The graduation rate in the Culvert district is 65% as compared to Ashbury’s 99% and Butler’s 90% (NYSED, 2018b). Furthermore, holistically as a district, Culvert reports lower proficiency rates of 25-30% lower than Butler at 40-45% and Ashbury at 70-75% for ELA and math (NYSED, 2018c). In addition, the Culvert district relies heavily on state aid, and as previously mentioned, the administration of the district wants to remain in compliance to avoid any unwanted scrutiny by the state.

**Why Parents Opt In**

The reasons for opting in among the Butler and Culvert districts were mostly comparable. The one similarity that ran across all three districts and ranked at the top of the list of reasons parents gave for opting in to the NYS ELA and math tests were that testing is a part of life and students need to practice test-taking skills. In the Ashbury district, the other two reasons were about the child and were centered on their child’s abilities and giving the child a voice in the decision-making process. While in contrast, the Butler and Culvert
districts decisions to opt in were parent centered to gather information about their child. Some of the parents in both districts stated that they took tests, testing is a part of school, and they wanted objective data. Parents in the three districts that opted in stated that because the tests did not count and the scores would not hurt them in any way, taking the test as practice is useful to develop the resilience and the skill to sit and take a standardized test.

Superintendent Iams shared that she opted out her son from the state tests due to anxiety. Iams said, “This year I saw the damaging effect of him not taking the state assessment when he had to take an entrance exam for a private school and wasn’t used to sitting for a standardized test.” Iams called it a “double-edged sword.”

In the Butler and the Culvert districts, parents want the data the tests yielded even if it is not used to drive instruction or evaluate their child and to evaluate teachers’ performance; it is another piece of information about their child. Parents in the Butler district used the information about their child for their own edification and some did not share the scores with their child. In the Culvert district, parents used the data to compare with the report card to parse out any discrepancies in the child’s performance; the parents in Culvert are using the data as part of their child’s academic portfolio.

Although the Ashbury district has a greater than 50% opt-out rate, I spoke with nine opt-in parents out of the 17 parents interviewed. Like the administrators of the district, Ashbury parents said they were honest with their child and that they take into account their child’s abilities and their child’s opinion about taking the test. Parents of children that can take the test without suffering from stress and anxiety or have any special needs discussed the tests with their child and made a collective decision to take the tests. One parent, Lidia, shared that her fifth-grade son asked her if he could opt out of the ELA test in the third grade.
His reason was that his weak reading skills made him nervous about the test. Lidia said, “I wanted his first experience taking the tests to be a good one, so I opted him out of the ELA.” Lidia shared that they revisited the discussion in fourth grade when his reading improved, and he took the ELA this year, 2019, in the fifth grade. In the Ashbury district where the population is predominately White and middle to upper SES, parents have access to the principal, teachers, parent social networks, and PTA. After the interview with Principal Strauss, there was a parent contingent waiting to meet with the principal to discuss one of the many functions the school offers to the students. There is a very powerful parent presence in the school during the day and at the PTA meeting I attended. Parents are visible in the school working on multiple projects and events.

Lastly, opting out was not even a consideration for some parents in the Butler and Culvert districts. Their children did not exhibit stress or anxiety, and, in Culvert, they did not have a definitive opinion about teacher evaluations using test scores. What did go into the decision to opt in was based solely on the fact that their child was capable of taking the tests and their child wanted to take the tests. Parents from the Butler district used words like “competitive,” “good test taker,” and “wants to take the tests” to describe their child’s attitude toward the test. Culvert parents said their child was “not nervous,” “capable,” and “a good student.” No matter how it was said, their child took the test without any issues. Unlike Ashbury, parents in the Butler and Culvert districts were not visible at PTA and PTSA meetings I attended, nor were they visible in school working on projects, displays, or school events during the times I was in the schools. Brooke, a White opt-out parent in the Butler district, said, “In Butler, because of our diversity, we have a hard time reaching all groups. Not everyone uses social media, and some don’t even check their child’s folder or even
knows to check it.” Jada, a Black opt-in parent in the Culvert district, confirmed, “When I go to PTA meetings and conference night, there’s a lot of parents not there.” Parents are their child’s best advocate, and if they are not able to access the school community or have the ability due to scheduling, they are less likely to be informed on school procedures, policies, and their rights as parents and may be blindly following along.

**Why Parents Opt Out and Opt In**

When it comes to taking the NYS tests in ELA and math, parents have the right to choose what is best for their child when making the decision to opt their child out or opt their child into the tests. The decision making may not be consistent each year and the reasons may also vary from year to year depending on their child. In the Ashbury district, two parents opted their child out of the ELA tests—one parent for one year and the other parent for two years. One parent based her decision on information from her teacher friends that the ELA is difficult, so she opted her daughter out of the test that year. Another parent opted her son out of the ELA because of weak reading and writing skills. Currently, both parents opted their child into the ELA. Another two parents opted out of the ELA and the math, but opted in for the science due to the hands-on nature of the test and it would be fun.

In the Butler district, parents exercised their right to choose what was best for their child when it was time to take the tests. The two parents from Butler opted their child out of the math test due to weak math skills. Both parents did not want to put their child through the pressure and stress for a test that does not count. Two other parents in the Butler district opted out of the ELA and math, but opted in for the science because of the hands-on format.

A Culvert opt-out parent decided one year to opt her child into the math test. She wanted the data to refute the teacher’s assessment that her daughter was having issues in
math. Once she received the scores and her daughter scored in the Level 4 category, she opted her out of all of the tests moving forward. Another Culvert parent opted her son out of the ELA, and he took only the math. Whatever the reasons are for opting out or opting in, some parents allow their child to have a voice in the decision-making process while other parents make the decision based on their child’s abilities and demeanor.

In Part One, I examined the districts’ stance on the tests and the opt-out movement as a major component as part of the parents’ decision-making process. In the next section, I compare and contrast the three district’s superintendents and principals’ perceptions of the tests and opting out. I examine their public message versus their internal beliefs, and the role they play in their policies and procedures for distributing testing information and opt-out messages.

Part Three

Superintendent and Principal Perceptions

A commonality among the three district leaders and building leaders are their negative views of the NYS ELA and math tests as not a useful instrument of measurement for students or teachers. Superintendent Kent from the Ashbury district said that the state moratorium on the test scores renders the tests useless for evaluating students or teachers. Superintendent Simmons from the Butler district complained that the scores are returned too late to be useful to drive instruction, “I have a philosophical problem with the timing of the information that comes back to us so that we can do something with the testing.” Ravitch (2018a) posited that the late return of test scores is not useful as formative assessment. Principal Owens from the Butler district called the tests “ridiculous.” While both Superintendent Iams and Principal Jones from the Culvert district called the tests “biased”
and lacking “culturally relevant texts.” Au (2015) agreed that the state tests and standardized tests, in general, lack multicultural and culturally relevant topics that “operates as a tool of White supremacy” that justifies racial order under the false pretense of “measuring individuals equally” (p. 27).

Despite their negative views of the NYS tests, not all of the district leaders and principals are pro-opt out. Superintendent Kent of the Ashbury district is the only district leader interviewed in this study that outwardly voiced his concerns about the tests in an open district forum. Principals and teachers in the Ashbury district do not persuade parents one way or the other, but they are not pressured from the state to steer parents to take the test. On the other hand, while the former administration of the Butler district spoke out against opting out, the current administration, under Superintendent Simmons, maintained a neutral stance on promoting or not promoting opting out and left it up to the parents to choose. Superintendent Simmons relayed that the NYS tests are not the only instrument of measure used in the district. Simmons shared, “I have no problem using it as one measure and part of the data process that we use.”

Although the superintendent of the Butler district had a more neutral view toward the tests and the opt-out movement, Principal Owens took a definite stance about her disdain for the opt-out movement and stated, “The state has allowed a culture where parents feel that they can sign a letter and they opt their child out of something that was really meant to see how our children were performing.” Even with Owens’ negative view of the tests, Owens is not happy with the handling of the testing scenario and the opt-out movement. Owens also called the district an “anomaly” with a decent amount of residents that enroll their children in the neighborhood parochial schools. For over two years, Butler has consolidated its district to
accommodate the low enrollment. The administration did not specifically mention it, but out of the 19 parents I interviewed, a third of the parents said they were not happy with the direction the district was taking with its curriculum and they are seeking a parochial high school.

In the same manner, the public message versus private ideas about the tests were evident with Principal Owens’ opinion of the tests and the opt-out movement, Superintendent Iams and Principal Jones of the Culvert district also had an issue with a public message versus private ideas. Both the superintendent and the principal called the tests “biased” and “not culturally relevant,” but yet there is a huge push to have the students of the Culvert district take the test. Even though there has not been a penalty leveled on a school or district for noncompliance with the 95% participation rate, Superintendent Iams just wanted to stay in compliance; their funding depended on it. At the building level, Principal Jones holds a pep rally the week before the tests. Jones fields phone calls from parents asking about opting out and tells them about the 95% participation rate, that they took tests when they were in school, and the tests do not define the child as to who he or she will be in the future. Jones shared that the Director of ENL services fielded the calls from the Spanish-speaking parents and they were told, “Listen, they’ll have to take the Regents exams, so why not let them start practicing now because they can’t opt out of those exams, which are part of them being able to graduate.” This low SES district did not have the luxury of defying the state for fear of unwanted scrutiny.

Not only are the perceptions of the district superintendents and principals about the tests and opting out differ, so are their policies and procedures for how they communicate with the parents about the tests and the opt-out procedures within their respective districts.
The next section outlines the school-to-home communications about the tests and the required procedure for opting out of the tests.

**School-to-Home Communications**

For the most part, each district is sending out the testing information through dates on the calendar, on the district and school websites, district apps, automated telephone calls, and meetings (PTA, PTSA, and SEPTA). Each district is making strides to present the information both in English and Spanish. In addition to the information about the testing dates, each district has its own procedure for opting out. First, in the Ashbury district, a letter is sent home to the parents around January or February asking the parents if they intend to opt out and which tests their child is not taking. The letter alone is sending the message that the district is going to prepare for parents to opt their children out of the tests and implies a tacit endorsement. Superintendent Kent said the letter is sent for logistical reasons to prepare to accommodate all the students and to have the proper space and staff available. The Ashbury parents also have the ability to opt out by email, a telephone call, or their own written letter or a downloaded letter from opt-out websites. Ashbury is the only district in this study to allow all of these modes of communication to opt out. Superintendent Kent said, “In the beginning we wanted everything in writing with a signature on it. Then we realized we were discriminating against certain people.” Thirteen out of the 17 parents interviewed in the Ashbury district for this study either knew about the letter or utilized the letter to opt out.

In the Butler and Culvert districts, the parents are responsible for writing a letter or downloading a prewritten letter template from the computer from one of the many opt-out websites. According to Principal Owens, the prior superintendent of the Butler district did not allow a form letter to be sent home and the new administration has not changed that.
Principal Owens stated, “They just write a note. Sometimes it’s on a scrap piece of paper. Sometimes it’s on a tissue.” In the Culvert district, the opt-out procedures are similar to Butler in that a written or downloaded letter is required to opt out of the tests. Principal Jones stated that more form letters are received versus handwritten letters. Jones also said “unfortunately,” letters are received up to the morning of the tests. Principal Jones explained, “I say unfortunately because you have everything set for the testing. You have all your books counted out; you’re ready to go. The children come into school that day, and they go to class and present a letter.” Jones continued to say that receiving letters on the day of the test is “unnerving.”

Conclusion

In the spring of each academic year, schools across New York State administered the English Language Arts and Mathematics tests. For two days per week for two weeks, one week for ELA and one week for math, students in grades three through eight have unlimited time to complete the test each day. Not all of the eligible students are sitting for these tests. Viewed as a grassroots movement, the opt-out movement in New York State maintains the highest opt-out rate in the country at 16% in 2019 (NYSED, 2019). Parents across New York State have the option to opt out their child from any or all of the tests. How they make their decision to opt out or opt in to the testing is a personal preference focused on their child’s individual needs and comforts. After interviewing 52 parents across three school districts: one with a high opt-out rate, one with a medium opt-out rate, and one with a low opt-out rate, it was apparent that whether informed or uninformed, parents’ decision making centers on the best interest of their child. In the Butler district, some of the White parents were aware
and concerned about what they classified as the uninformed Latinx families but did not offer a solution.

As explained in this chapter, parents who opt out or opt in do so for reasons as, the stress and anxiety that their child has or will experience during the test administration, stress for a test that does not count toward anything, and the unfair tethering of student test scores to teacher evaluations. Even though Governor Cuomo signed a law that eliminated the use of the NYS tests for teacher evaluations, but instead, districts will have to determine what other standardized tests to use for teacher evaluations, parents are standing in solidarity with their teachers in their districts, in their families, and their teacher friends. Parents that opt in also make their decision based on their child. Parents may opt out one child and opt in another based on the child’s academics and personality. Parents are also choosing which tests they will opt out of or opt into and their decision may change each year. Just like opt-out parents, parents who opt in base their decision on their child’s ability and personality and do so to teach their child resilience. Parents explained that their child does not experience test anxiety and no academic challenges; in their academic future, children will take tests as well as in life and the workplace.

The data in this chapter also showed that the administrators have a stake in the education of the population in their charge and have the enormous responsibility to provide a free and appropriate education to each member of the district and school community. Although performed in different ways, the administrators of the Ashbury, Butler, and Culvert School districts made and continue to make decisions that they feel are in the best interest of the students, the teachers, and the parents. All of the administrators are in agreement that the New York State English Language Arts and Mathematics tests are not an accurate measure of
student growth, cannot be used to drive instruction, and should not be used to evaluate teachers. All three districts are forthcoming with information about test dates, changes to the test, and offer informational sessions about the content of the test. Although the three district leaders vary in their view of test prep, they assured that teachers are providing quality lessons that address the skills and strategies needed to advance to the next grade.
Chapter Five  

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to make sense of how parents made the decision to opt their child out or opt in for the New York State English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics tests in the fourth and fifth grade, and how their decision related to the school districts’ dissemination of information. Chapter One of this dissertation study investigated the problem of why parents that opt out tend to be disproportionately White, educated, and middle to upper class and how, if at all, the school district distributed information about testing and the option to opt out. This study is grounded in the literature reviewed in Chapter Two on the opt-out movement, including its origins, agenda, and impact. To analyze the nuances of the parental decision-making process, I designed and conducted a qualitative phenomenological multi-case study in three districts: one with a high, one with a medium, and one with a low opt-out rate using the conceptual framework of Christiansen’s four-stage model (2009), Bourdieu’s social capital theory (1973, 1984), and rational choice theory (Abell, 1992; Coleman & Fararo, 1992; Mooney-Marini, 1992; Münch, 1992; Scheff, 1992).

The methodology used for this dissertation study was an inquiry-based research design with a constructivist worldview. I utilized in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured, 30-60 minute interviews with the three superintendents, four principals (two in one district), and 52 parents across the three districts. The data collection spanned between September 2018 and March 2019, and included attendance at PTA meetings, PTSA meetings, and school functions. During the period from October 2019 to July 2019, interviews and observational data obtained from PTA and PTSA meetings as well as school-based programs were
transcribed and coded. Upon completion of this process, emerging themes were analyzed, and member-checked in a systematic process to answer the research questions:

1. What does it mean to be a fourth-and fifth-grade parent in a high, medium, or low opt-out district?

2. What are the reasons parents give for opting their child out or opting them in to the New York State tests in high, medium, and low districts?
   a. How do these parents receive their information about the New York State tests and their options to opt their child out of the tests?
   b. According to Christiansen’s (2009) model, how does each of the three district’s opt-out movement correspond to the four stages?

3. How do superintendents and principals in the three Long Island districts make sense of the opt-out rates in their district?
   a. What are the communication procedures for parent social networks between school to home regarding opting out?
   b. What are the policies and procedures for parents who choose to opt their child out of the New York State tests?

4. How do the high opt-out, medium opt-out, and low-opt out district’s communication strategies and responses to parents differ regarding the state tests?

   Included in this chapter is a comprehensive explanation of the findings and conclusions drawn from the coded data presented in Chapter Four that answer the research questions. In summary, the data showed that (a) the district’s stance on opting out was a reflection of parents’ individualistic choice to participate or not participate in the opt-out movement, (b) parents made informed or uninformed decisions about opting out based on the
information from the district and social networks of information, and (c) the reasons parents
gave for opting out were mostly superficial, about their own child, and not directly linked to
the opt-out movement.

I organized Chapter Five with a discussion of the key takeaways followed by how the
findings relate to the four-stage model of a social movement (Christiansen, 2009), social
capital theory (Bourdieu, 1973, 1984), and rational choice theory (Abell, 1992; Coleman &
Fararo, 1992; Mooney-Marini, 1992; Münch, 1992; Scheff, 1992). Then I discuss the
findings in relation to the literature on the opt-out movement and the demographics of the
opt-out and opt-in parents. This study supports the existing literature, and explains how the
data deviates from it, and breaks new ground. Further, I propose ideas for future research
based on the findings and suggest possible implications for education policies. Finally, I
close this chapter with a concise reflection of the topic based on what I gleaned from
conducting this research.

**Key Takeaways**

As a classroom teacher in a private setting, I did not have any direct dealings with the
opt-out movement and was unaware of the multi-faceted dynamic of the controversy
surrounding testing. After spending a great deal of time analyzing and reflecting on the
findings of my data, I have come to a greater understanding that the opt-out movement is
driven by forces so complex that the majority of parents, though exercising choice, really
only scratch the surface of understanding the larger issues. This happened even in districts
where the administrators provided comprehensive information. Indeed, even after probing to
elicit deeper responses, I found most parents I interviewed gave superficial and
individualistic reasons for opting out or opting in. In the section below, I describe the key
takeaways from this research, including (a) each district’s quality and quantity of given information about the tests and opting out mirrored their opt-out rates, (b) administrator’s testing philosophies were different than the policies they implemented, (c) parents’ access to information was related to the SES of the district, and (d) almost all parents made the decision to opt out or opt in based on personal child-rearing philosophies and values and few parents gave reasons connected to the opt-out movement agenda.

**District Communication and Opt-Out Rate**

Schools in America today are situated in a society that claims to be democratic, yet this study revealed the inequities at every turn. The American public education system is, in reality, a story of the haves and the have nots, with SES as the template for life and determining success (Au, 2015). The findings of this study revealed that the higher SES families in the Ashbury and Butler districts have access to more materials, information, and advantage to make informed choices about whether to opt out or opt in to the NYS tests in ELA and math. The disparity between SES is revealed by the quantity and the quality of the opt-out information both formally via the district and informally via parent networks and social media as experienced by the parents across the three districts. The Ashbury district with a high SES and predominantly White population, reported a low opt-out rate, low-stakes tests, and no test prep. The district superintendent was vocal with the outward message that the NYS tests in ELA and math are not reliable or valid instructional tools. Additionally, the superintendent and the principals were respectful of parents’ rights to opt out their child from the tests. The district made it easy for the parents to opt out by sending home a form to fill out.
The Butler district with a diverse population and SES reported a medium opt-out rate, medium-stakes tests, and moderate test prep without purchased materials. Even though the district superintendent voiced concern about the late return of tests scores that cannot be used to drive instruction, the outward message to parents remained neutral about opting out. The parents perceived the district as leaving it up to them, the parents, to conduct their own research and make their own decision about opting out. There is a disparity between the public message and private ideas about the tests. Principal Owens promoted the tests yet blamed the state as the cause of the opt-out movement. Owens argued that the state created a culture that allowed parents the power to disrupt a test meant to measure achievement; yet, Owens called it a “ridiculous” test.

The obvious discrepancy among the three districts was that in the Culvert district with a majority Latinx and Black population and low SES, there was an overreliance on test prep materials and time spent on test prep to boost scores, which was consistent with the literature (Cho & Eberhard, 2013; Condron, 2011). Superintendent Iams reasoned that as a low-performing district where test scores are tied to teacher evaluations, teachers and building administrators welcomed additional test prep-materials. Iams believed the faculty were motivated by an effort to raise test scores and avoid their termination; state oversight of the district and closure; or consolidation of their schools. Also like Butler, there was a disconnect between the public message versus the private beliefs held by the administration regarding the tests. Superintendent Iams and Principal Jones both wanted to remain compliant with the state, so they did not encourage parents to opt out. Iams believed that the tests lacked culturally relevant reading passages and Iam’s son opted out of the state tests. Principal Jones also said the tests were culturally biased, yet conducted pep rallies and pizza parties as
incentives for the students to take the tests. The opinions of both Iams and Jones about the tests lacking culturally relevant texts corresponded with the literature (Au, 2015).

The findings support the literature that higher SES districts such as Ashbury and Butler, did not experience state pressure to have all students take the tests and improve scores, and did not, in general, fear for the future of their school systems (Au, 2015). In districts such as Ashbury and Butler, funding is spent on materials that are designed to improve the quality of teaching, the curriculum remains broad, and students are not subjected to as much, if any, test prep. In contrast, in an effort to raise test scores, the Culvert district was the opposite and used funding intended to improve the quality of education for the district to purchase test-prep materials.

**Administrators’ Outside Messaging vs. Internal Beliefs**

Another key takeaway is the conflict in the administrators’ delivered message to their district as opposed to their personal opinion of the tests and of the opt-out movement in general and within their respective districts. All three superintendents and all four principals interviewed in this study believed the tests lacked educational value for all stakeholders and questioned, in some form, the validity of the tests. However, only Superintendent Kent, from the Ashbury district, spoke out publically and honestly about tests and supported the parents’ right to choose what was best for their child. Principal Strauss and Principal Vaughn also kept an open and honest dialogue with their parents, and they supported and guided parents to do what is best for their child when making their decision to opt out or opt in.

In the Butler district, previous administrators told parents there was no such thing as opting out and all students in grades three to eight are expected to take the tests. When Superintendent Simmons started as the district leader in 2018, Simmons maintained a status
quo philosophy about testing and opting out. Although the superintendent objected to the turn-around time of the test scores and the overabundance of tests per year, Simmons’ approach was neutral. Butler is forthcoming with test content and dates and offered morning support programs to the most vulnerable students, but Superintendent Simmons does not offer any opinion or information about opting out. Principal Owens was also conflicted, calling the tests “ridiculous” but yet voiced annoyance about the opt-out movement.

The superintendent of the Culvert district also spoke with contradiction. The major issues for Culvert are they heavily rely on state aid and they are a low-performing district. Having said that, Superintendent Iams wanted to stay in compliance with the state and the 95% participation rate. Once again, the conflict of public message versus private beliefs as the superintendent did not believe in the tests stating the ELA lacked culturally relevant texts and Iams’ son opted out of the tests. At the building level, Principal Jones called the tests biased but yet engaged in organized test prep with purchased test-prep materials, held a pep rally the week before the tests, and offered pizza party incentives to encourage the parents and students to participate in the tests.

**Parents Access to Information Related to SES**

This study revealed inequitable communication strategies across the three districts. The Ashbury district with a middle to affluent SES was forthcoming with opt-out information and parents’ rights to choose, while Butler, with a middle SES, and Culvert, with a low SES, were forthcoming about test content with no mention about opting out and parents’ rights to choose. As a result, Ashbury, with a middle to affluent SES, had a greater than 50% opt-out rate; Butler, with a middle SES, had a 30-40% opt-out rate; and Culvert, with a low SES, had a less than 20% opt-out rate.
In the Butler and Culvert districts with middle to low SES, respectively, and inequitable communication strategies about opting out and parents’ right to choose, the administrators and parents voiced misconceptions and biases about parents from diverse cultural backgrounds, particularly Latinx immigrant parents who tended to opt in. As a group, Latinx parents were perceived by school personnel to be hands off in their attitude toward their child’s education. Yet, the small number of Latinx parents interviewed for this study were found to be proactive in their child’s education; some parents paid outside tutors and were diligent about their child attending before-and after-school extra help programs. For seven of the Latinx immigrant parents, test scores were a driving force for their decision to opt into the state tests to obtain objective data on their child. While some administrators claimed that Latinx immigrant parents might not be familiar with the way the American public school system works as a reason for a lack of parent involvement. The Latinx parents I interviewed, even if unable to attend school-based meetings, were well aware of the services the school offered to support their child. In this study, White parents and administrators showed evidence of overlooking the obstacles that immigrant parents face and viewed them as lacking interest in their child’s education. This deficit-based attitude fostered a bias based on false perceptions aimed at all Latinx families. The mentioned misconceptions are aligned with the literature that explained the obstacles immigrant parents face in participating in school-based meetings and activities (McCollum, 1996).

Another misinterpretation by administrators was that all Latinx immigrant parents are not interested in the issues surrounding testing or are not aware of their right to opt out. In actuality, according to the findings of this study, only one Culvert parent was not aware of the opt-out movement. Indeed, Latinx parents in the sample said they want their child to have
all the resources that are available to them and opting out of a test that will yield objective
data about their child is not something they want to do. This study revealed that immigrant
parents are not challenging the education system but are entrusting the school and the
teachers to educate their child. The misinterpretation about immigrant parents corresponded
with a survey funded by the Joyce Foundation, in which authors, Tompson et al. (2013)
determined that 42% Latinx parents and 36% Black parents have a positive view of
standardized tests as a measurement for their child’s performance and to gauge the quality of
their education.

Another realization of this study that supported the literature was that some
immigrant parents hold two jobs to sustain their families, which explains their poor
attendance at school-based meetings (Lareau, 1987). The lack of parent availability was
prevalent when trying to acquire participants and then scheduling appointments. Lareau’s
(1987) study also corresponded with the finding that the lack of language acquisition for
immigrant parents contributed to a lack of connection/communication between them and the
school. As witnessed at PTSA meetings and school events I attended, non-English speaking
parents often relied on their children or an older child within the family to interpret school
communications. These findings about lack of communication because of language barriers
mirror the literature that claimed districts with low SES tend to be districts with low opt-out
rates (Chingos, 2015).

These misperceptions about parental values of education and parent involvement
levels, in many ways, are a disservice to the children because administrators seemed to be
making assumptions about how much parents cared about their child’s education based on
whether they opt out or opt in. Administrators’ comments such as, “they don’t come to
anything” or “they don’t speak English” gives credence to the notion that culturally diverse parents demonstrate a low level of investment in their child’s schooling (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Administrators acknowledge there are breaches between the school and the community by paying lip service to it, but they do not offer any solutions to get to know the needs of their community to fix the communication gap. Ultimately, the analysis reverts to SES in that the higher the SES of the district, the better the communication between the school administrators and parents about the opt-out movement, and the more social capital available to parents for decision-making purposes.

**Opting Out or Opting In: An Individualistic Choice**

The 52 parents interviewed in this study have addressed how they conceptualize their decision to either opt out or opt in their child to the NYS tests in ELA and math. Although the opt-out movement is viewed as a politically charged social movement, most of the parents in this study did not cite the political nature of the movement but rather cited individualistic reasons for opting out or opting in. Regardless of their SES, parents made their decisions to opt out or opt in based on their personal child-rearing philosophies and values.

**Opt-out parents.** Parents made choices that maximized their child’s educational interests and minimized stress and anxiety over testing. Parents across the three districts cited stress, anxiety, and pressure as their number-one reason to opt out confirming the literature that anxiety was the motivator for Jeannette Deutermann (2014) to start an opt-out campaign on Long Island. Studies on test anxiety performed by Von Der et al. (2012), Putwain et al. (2012), and Segool et al. (2013) supported parents’ decision to protect their child from stress and anxiety for a test.
Other reasons for opting out included the tests do not count, so there is no reason to take it. Some parents in all three districts opted out because taking a test that is not used to measure achievement or to drive instruction is taking up valuable teaching time. Some Ashbury parents also considered their child’s opinion about taking the tests as a means to make their decision to opt their child out of the tests. Parents in the Butler district opted out as a show of solidarity with teachers and their disdain for the use of test scores in the evaluation process. Also, in the Culvert district, parents cited dissatisfaction with an overreliance on test prep but not all of them opted out of the testing. In addition, one opt-out parent from the Ashbury district voiced her frustration about the political and financial underpinnings of testing as part of the opt-out movement. Although it was not her top reason to opt out, she did say that testing generates revenue and she questioned who was getting paid. Two parents from Ashbury and one parent from Culvert who opted out also mentioned school funding, the use of cooperative money, and school ratings in their interview, but they did not cite these as their definitive reasons to opt out their child from the tests.

**Opt-in parents.** Just like the opt-out parents interviewed, the opt-in parents also made decisions that were individualistic and grounded in their desire to do what is best for their child. Regardless of SES, parents opted in because they believed that testing is a part of life and their child needed the skills and endurance to sit for a standardized test. Whether parents opted out or opted in, both groups of parents cited that the test does not count but then made different decisions. For the opt-in parents, having the opportunity to practice and attain test-taking skills, even with a test that “does not count,” optimized the experience by alleviating negative consequences. There was also a subgroup of seven opt-in parents who stated their child wanted to take the tests and had the abilities to take the tests without any
negative side effects. Another 10 parents who opted in their child wanted the test scores as objective data about their child.

Overall, parents in all three districts with varying SES wanted the best for their child and made their choice based on their child-rearing philosophies and values toward education. In the end, there were a few parents who mentioned the opt-out movement agenda, but did not quote it as their driving force toward their decision to opt out or opt in.

Contributions to Theory

One of the frameworks used in this dissertation study was Christiansen’s (2009) four-stage model of social movements to examine social movement theory and apply the theory to the opt-out movement as a way to understand its structure, agenda, and outcomes. Another theory utilized in this study was Bourdieu’s (1973, 1984) social capital theory to analyze how, if at all, parents can access the social capital of their school community to make an informed decision. The third theory applied in this study was rational choice theory to scrutinize how informed parents came to their decisions and what values and beliefs they considered when making a rational choice that will yield the best outcome for their child (Abell, 1992; Coleman & Fararo, 1992; Mooney-Marini, 1992; Münch, 1992; Scheff, 1992). In the following section, I include an explanation of these theories and how I used them to make sense of the data, findings, and implications.

Christiansen’s Four-Stage Model of Social Movements

The findings of this study support the theory and structure of Christiansen’s (2009) four-stage model of social movements. From formation to success, the opt-out movement follows the systematic organization of the Christiansen model. The themes that emerged from the qualitative interviews supported the fourth-stage of the model for each district. For
Christiansen, stage four is called decline but not in the literal sense. This stage is sub-divided into categories of (a) repression, (b) co-optation, (c) success, and (d) failure. The findings of this study suggest that districts with mostly White, middle to upper SES student populations achieved success in the Christensen model for the opt-out movement. In contrast, districts with low SES and a majority Latinx immigrant population would be classified as a failure.

Parents are opting out each year with a disproportionate number of parents in the middle to high SES, predominately White populations (Clayton, Bingham, & Ecks, 2019; Pizmony-Levy & Green Sariasky, 2016). White parents are able to organize, mobilize through multiple social networks and PTA meetings with a stronger sustaining power, and recruit new constituents to opt out of the testing. According to this study, districts with open communication and a strong PTA presence in the school community had an influential voice. For example, the administrators in the Ashbury district supported the success of the opt-out movement by being forthcoming with information to the parents and speaking with them honestly about their child. Superintendent Kent said that the district’s position is that they are a state agency that does what the state asks them to do. But Kent continued, “And yet, we, as professionals, make a decision as to whether or not the information we’re gathering back from the state is viable and useful.”

The leadership in the Ashbury district disseminates information about the flaws in the NYS ELA and math tests and parents’ rights to opt their child out of the tests. In turn, the parents are well-informed and able to make a rational choice that will render the best result for their child. For the parents in the Ashbury district, 11 out of 17 interviewed for this study felt the opt-out movement was successful because of the changes the state has made and the talk of the teacher evaluations no longer tied to the students’ test scores. The other six parents
were undecided because the tests are administered each year and not all of the opt-out issues are addressed.

Similarly, the districts with a diverse racial and SES population reached partial success according to Christiansen’s model and reported a medium opt-out rate. To illustrate, the Butler School District fell into the partial success category and reported a 30-40% opt-out rate (“Projects: ELA and Math Opt-out 2016-2019,” 2019). Although Superintendent Simmons was not forthcoming with opt-out information, parents, through their research, are slowly revitalizing their opt-out movement with new constituents via social networks. The issue for Butler is that the groups are exclusive and does not include all members of the population. Even though the district is neutral in their opt-out communications and attendance was lacking at PTA meetings, a social network is in place outside of the school. However, the network includes parents in what one parent called “the grapevine” comprised of White parents that attend school meetings and then share their messages through their social networks. This leaves out Black and Latinx families.

Superintendent Simmons also stated that since the test scores are returned to the district late in the academic year, they are not a reliable and valid instrument of measurement to drive instruction or to evaluate teachers. Principal Owens, from the Butler district, said that as a state agency, they are administering the tests but cites the state was the blame for the parent uprising by creating a rigorous test that was not implemented properly. When I asked parents in the Butler district if they believed the opt-out movement was a success or a failure, the responses were: 11 out of the 19 parents thought the opt-out movement was a success because the state made the test shorter in content and fewer days spent testing. There were
four parents who did not have an opinion either way and another four parents believed the opt-out movement was a failure because the test administration occurs each year,

In contrast, the district with low SES and a majority of Latinx parents reported a low opt-out rate and are in the sub-category of repression in the Christiansen model due to a lack of strategic action, parent-led organizations, and strong pushback from the administrators. In the Culvert district, the opt-out rate is less than 20%, and there is no specific voice that is directing the parents to the opt-out agenda (“Projects: ELA and Math Opt-out 2016-2019,” 2019). Without a PTA, parents do not have a voice to rally, organize, and mobilize the movement within their district. Administrators at the building level are holding pep rallies, pizza parties, and giving prizes as incentives to deter parents from opting their child out of the tests. Parents are learning about the opt-out movement from other parents outside of the district, coworkers, and from family and friends that are teachers. With a majority of Latinx families in the district and some non-English speakers, they are disenfranchised from school events and informational sessions because of the language barrier. Families are predominantly working-class people, and some of the Latinx parents I spoke with had a marginal amount of time to speak with me due to their work schedules. Out of the 16 parents I spoke with, seven thought the opt-out movement was successful due to the changes in the test and the fact that parents were talking about it. Alma, a Latina parent said, “Anytime they get the parents involved, and the parents are aware, yes, they’ll be successful.” Two parents thought the opt-out movement was unsuccessful because the administration of the tests continued, and seven were unable to answer the question due to a lack of information about the movement’s agenda. A lack of action on the part of the parents as not caring and indifferent to participating in school activities is misconstrued. However, when a district
supports the tests through pep rallies and rewards, it makes it difficult for parents to buy into the goals and ambitions of the opt-out movement even when they have the knowledge of their right to opt out.

**Social Capital Theory**

This study found that the parents’ race and SES impacted their ability to access the social capital of the school community (Bourdieu, 1973, 1984). Middle-class, White parents had a sense of entitlement and were more inclined to question and negotiate with school authorities to advocate for their child’s needs, in this case to opt out or opt in. In addition, middle-class parents had more institutional knowledge and resources to problem solve, which afforded them the opportunity to make informed, rational decisions on behalf of their child. For example, Naomi, a White opt-out parent from Ashbury, said that she was informed through her social networks, social media, district forums, and PTA meetings. She attributed the high opt-out rate in her district to SES and said:

> I think that when all of your socioeconomic needs are met, you are still looking for something to care deeply and passionately about in terms of your kid’s education. I think when you are at a lower socioeconomic level, your concern is more, I have to get these kids in college.

In contrast, Latinx immigrant parents were restrained and respectful of school authorities and were also distrustful in their attitude toward the school district. This was evident with the parents who wanted the objective, standardized test score data to paint the academic portrait of their child rather than solely rely on the teacher and the school administration. Latinx immigrant parents may not be overly active in the school’s social capital, but they are not complacent either in their desire for their child to succeed academically.
Another revelation from the findings of this study is Latinx immigrant parents were less likely to access the social capital of the school community, and, in the case of Culvert, a parent-led school community did not exist. Without any parent representation or voice in the conversation about the school community, the power is relegated back to the school. The data revealed that immigrant parents wanted to participate in the school community and wanted the district to provide them with opportunities to learn English. There is a breach in the school-to-home communications about the testing and opting out because notices going home are not always translated into students’ native languages, and not all of the teachers and administrators are bilingual. There was also pressure to take the tests and comply with state oversight of the 95% participation rate.

**Rational Choice Theory**

A rational choice is one made with knowledge of both sides of the issue and one’s values and beliefs. In the case of decision making, parents utilize information and do so with the goal of yielding the best results for their child (Coleman & Fararo, 1992). According to the data, the philosophy of the district leader on opting out related to parents’ ability to make a rational choice. For example, if a district leader promotes opting out, that is the school culture, and if a district leader promotes the testing, then that is the school culture. The institutional structure is the macro level, and the parents are at the meso and micro level. Parents make their decision to opt out or opt in based on their relationship with the school community (macro) teamed with their socially constructed values and beliefs through interactions with their friends and family (meso), which ultimately informs their individual choice to opt out or in (micro; Mooney-Marini, 1992).
The data of this study revealed that parents who had attained information, whether it be from the district, their own research, or social networks, made an informed, rational choice about opting their child out or opting their child into the testing. Another revelation in the study was that parents are not making their decision based on the full agenda of the opt-out movement; only 7% of the parents interviewed mentioned corporate intervention, privatization, and a neoliberal agenda. Information about the opt-out movement was important, but for the parents in this study, their values and beliefs about testing played a significant role in their decision-making process. One Latino parent from the Culvert district was unaware of the opt-out movement and his right to opt his child out of the tests. During the interview was the first time he heard of the movement and went on to say why he wanted his son to take the tests. For immigrant parents, whether they are informed or not about their right to opt out their child from the tests, what they want from the district for their child’s academic career is at the center of their decision-making process. Regardless of SES and whether immigrant parents were either directly informed or not about opting out from their district, their principles toward education was their first consideration.

**Consideration of Findings in View of the Research**

The unique contribution of this study on the opt-out movement is that it adds qualitative data to the current literature that consists of quantitative studies on the demographics of the participants in the opt-out movement and their decision-making process. Through the interviews, parents shared their experiences, if any, with the opt-out movement, their school and district’s stance on opting out, and their social networks of information about opting out. This dissertation also adds to the body of literature by including
underrepresented voices from districts that are diverse in race/ethnicity and SES. In the following section, I explain the study’s contributions to the literature.

**Who Opt Out and Who Opt In**

The findings add to the existing literature as to who opts out and why parents opt out or not (Au, 2017; Bennett, 2016a; Hildebrand, 2017; Klein, 2016; Murphy, 2017; Phi Delta Kappa & Gallup Poll, 2017; Pizmony-Levy & Green Saraisky, 2016; Ryan, 2016; Tompson et al., 2013). The literature showed that Latinx and Black families wanted the test scores to uncover the inequities in their schools and attain the funding to make the necessary improvements (Harris, 2015; Klein, 2016; Wang, 2017). The Latinx and Black families in this study took a personal approach focusing on obtaining objective data about their child and not relying solely on the school and the teacher’s report card grades and comments. The Phi Delta Kappa and Gallup Poll (2017) determined Latinx and Black parents support testing at a higher rate than Whites. The data from this study supported this claim with the findings of 69% of the parents interviewed in the Culvert district that opted in were Latinx and Black. In the Ashbury district, 50% of the parents interviewed who opted in were White and in the Butler district, 59% of the parents interviewed who opted in were White.

**Physical and Emotional Anxiety**

Another addition to the literature is the parent data that showed the physical and emotional anxiety some students exhibited due to the high-stress environment of the test (Brooks, 2018; Deutermann, 2014; Frenette, 2015; Phillips, 2014; Putwain et al., 2012; “Tyranny of Testing,” 2018; Von Der Embse & Hasson, 2012). The parents in the study stated that children were getting stressed and anxious (a) before the test due to the build-up for the test, (b) during the test due to the developmental inappropriateness of the tests, and (c)
after the tests due to high-stakes put on the scores. Most parents who had a child with an IEP took particular caution in not putting their child in a precarious situation.

**Test Prep**

Another contribution from the study that adds to the body of literature is the overreliance on test prep in marginalized districts that are under pressure to raise their test scores (Au, 2015; Condron, 2011). The Ashbury district had the highest opt-out rates and the lowest emphasis on test prep. Superintendent Kent along with Principals Strauss and Vaughn said that they do not engage in test prep, just good teaching. The Butler district had medium opt-out rates and Superintendent Simmons and Principal Owens said that they do not engage in test prep with purchased materials, and the teachers incorporate the wording and format of the tests into their curriculum.

The Culvert district had the lowest opt-out rates and the highest emphasis on test prep. Superintendent Iams said that the teachers asked for the test-prep materials. According to Iams, as a consequence of APPR tying test scores to teacher evaluations, teachers feared that low test scores would threaten their job security (Rucinski & Diersing, 2014). Principal Jones also said that the amount of test prep per classroom was dependent on the teacher, but according to the parents and Principal Jones, test prep, as a whole, increased from 20% to 50% of classroom instructional time prior to the testing months.

This study showed that the Culvert district with the lowest SES and the highest population of Latinx and Black families endured test prep beginning in January and ending on the test dates in the spring. Test prep is during and after class with purchased test-preparatory materials; funds allocated for improving the quality of education is rerouted toward improving test scores (Au, 2015; Jones, 2014; Croft et al., 2016). Interestingly, even
though the administration of the Culvert district expressed disdain for the tests, the pressure to be in compliance and to raise test scores took precedence over Superintendent Iams’ philosophy of education.

**Teacher Evaluations**

Through this study, the theme of parents opting out in protest over test scores being tied to teacher evaluations is supported in the findings in the Ashbury and Butler districts. Parents stood in solidarity with their teacher friends and the teachers in their child’s school to support ending the statistically flawed disruptive practice (“Using Value-Added Models,” 2014). Superintendent Simmons of the Butler district strongly believed the teachers and APPR was the impetus of the opt-out movement. Under the guise of rewarding states that wanted to “support and enhance education reform,” Race to the Top (RttT) funds were made available to states that agreed to a number of reforms (Moldt, 2016, p. 225). To compete for RttT funding, districts had to adopt the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and establish APPR to evaluate teachers and principals with various measures with 40% of their scores based on student performance on the New York State Common Core ELA and math tests (Moldt, 2016).

Race to the Top disrupted education by diverting millions of dollars from districts to administer CCSS tests and set up APPR plans (Rucinski & Diersing, 2014). Parents and teachers were outraged by the tests that were designed to drop student scores by as much as 30% and rank teachers ineffective (Rucinski & Diersing, 2014; Shapiro, 2019). Finally after four years of controversy, in 2019, the New York State Legislature bowed to public pressure and passed a bill that expunged the connection between teacher evaluations and test scores from the NYS ELA and math tests, and was signed into law by Governor Andrew M. Cuomo.
on April 12, 2019 (Hildebrand, 2019). Districts will now have the ability to negotiate with their teacher unions to select the tests to be used to evaluate their teachers (Hildebrand, 2019; Shapiro, 2019).

**Information Process**

A key addition to helping fill the gap in the literature on the opt-out movement is the finding concerning how parents receive their information and the influence SES and race/ethnicity has on the dissemination of information. Parents in the Ashbury district receive accurate information from the administration about the tests and parents’ rights to opt out their child through district forums with guest speakers as well as PTA meetings. Months in advance of the tests, the district provides a form that asks the parents if they are opting out their child. Parents feel comfortable calling the principal of their school to ask questions with the confidence they are receiving objective information that will foster their child’s emotional health. The Butler district, with a diverse population and SES, relied on the parents to send in their own letter to opt out. The administrators in the Butler district did not get involved with the opt-out movement and merely provide the dates of the tests and released test questions to enlighten parents as to what their child can expect on the tests.

The information process varies across the three districts. The superintendent of the Ashbury district, with a predominantly White population and a high SES, sends a comprehensive message about the tests and opting out, they have an influential PTA, and an active social network. The superintendent in the Butler district, with a diverse population and middle class SES, takes a neutral stance on opting out, provides information about the tests, has limited attendance at PTA and PTSA meetings, and while there is a parent social network, not all members of the community are included. The superintendent in the Culvert
district, with a low SES and a majority of Latinx and Black families, does not provide information about opting out but provides information about the tests. At the building level, there are pep rallies and rewards for taking the tests as well as citing the 95% Adequate Yearly Progress as ways to entice parents to have their child take the tests. Low-performing districts, SES, and race/ethnicity play a role in the quality and quantity of information disseminated by districts about parents’ rights to opt out their child from the NYS tests.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study’s findings suggest the need for future research in the following areas. One idea for future research could be an in-depth study of low SES districts with parents who opt out. According to the current literature, the demographic of opt-out parents are White, middle-class parents. Researching marginalized parents that are mobilizing other parents to opt out would help to gain a greater understanding of their reasons for opting out. The current literature portrays this group of parents as pro-opt in, but several news reports have portrayed parent mobilization efforts in low-income communities (Thorne, 2017).

Another consideration for future research is to investigate other districts on Long Island where parents are opting out at lower rates and have a high SES. There are multiple districts across Long Island that have a majority of Asian students with low opt-out rates. Researching their reasons for opting in or out and comparing them to the findings of this study would add to the understanding of the opt-out phenomenon.

A final suggestion is to conduct a study that includes the perceptions of the educators and their response to the state tests and the opt-out movement. Teachers started the opt-out movement; the Badass Teachers Association (BATS) were the original organizers of the testing resistance movement. Garnering their insights and projections for the future of
standardized testing will not only disclose opinions and suggestions but may also drive policy change for the future.

**Implications of Study for Current Policy and Practice**

My recommendations include advice for opt-out organizers: When parents choose to create an impact on the state, they should be more inclusive. Some of the parents in the Ashbury and Butler districts are aware of the Latinx, immigrant population in their district that are not attending school-based meetings and events, but they did not offer a way to include them. One parent in Butler said there is a “grapevine” for information and not everyone in the school community has access to it. There is a majority of White parent participation in the opt-out movement. Districts with diverse populations are aware of the exclusion of other races/ethnicities, but they are not offering an option to promote inclusion.

Next, educational practice should be aligned with educational philosophy rather than constraints of testing. Decoupling the high-stakes associated with the tests is the first step. Tests should be viewed as one indicator of a child’s academic achievement and should not be used to evaluate teachers, sort students, or rank schools. These steps would decrease test prep and competition. Administrators in low SES districts, like Culvert, are under pressure to raise low test scores to avoid state scrutiny, and they hold pep rallies, offer pizza parties, and other incentives to cajole students to take the tests. With the inception of the Common Core State Standards and the accompanying tests, progressive educational pedagogy has been diluted and exchanged for skill-and-drill test prep in schools with diverse populations and low SES, like Culvert, in an effort to raise test scores to avoid state intervention. Schools with the greatest need for educational resources are using their funding designated to improve the quality of education to purchase test-prep materials.
Finally, district administrators would benefit from expanded efforts into knowing the community. Administrators in the three districts are aware of the lack of attendance at school-based meetings and events by the Latinx immigrant population in their districts, yet they do not offer any outreach programs that involve community leaders to offer support and opportunities for parents to be a part of the school community. It is evident that testing in its current state is detrimental to all stakeholders, and the administrator’s voice or lack of a voice creates a breach between the school and the community it serves.

Limitations

Conducting qualitative research through interviews poses some limitations to the data collection process. One limitation was acquiring a representative sample of participants. By design, this is an in-depth, phenomenological, multi-case, inquiry-based study with a purposive small sample size. The aim is not replication with control groups but is designed to explore and discover the phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants and to gain greater understanding of how the administrators and parents are making sense of this phenomenon in the three districts. Due to the nature of the design, this study offers depth and not breadth, and it does not include the Asian population. There is a sizable Asian population in other districts across Long Island, and this study does not capture their perspective. The sample is also skewed White and high income. Future studies should capture the Black and Latinx parents in more depth.

Conclusion

Since its inception in 2014, the Long Island Opt-Out Movement has garnered the attention of the state regarding the dysfunctional testing system and rendered changes to the tests, the number of days spent testing, and the decoupling of the state test scores to teacher
evaluations, and there remains room for more productive changes. The findings of this study showed that not all parents are aware of their right to opt out their child and not all parents receive the same information or any information at all. The debate between parents, administrators, and the state, as to who owns a child’s education was the impetus for parents to take a stand, speak out, and take back their power to decide what is best for their child’s education.

Unfortunately, not all parents have the same voice and are not given the same forum to express their views. Schools that have low-performance rates on the NYS tests are under the watchful eye of the state to raise their scores. The data from this study showed that parents in low-performing school districts with a low SES, and a majority of Latinx and Black populations are not given the same information as the predominantly White parents in school districts with a higher SES. In low SES districts, information about parental rights to opt out is exchanged for pep rallies, pizza parties, and prizes to encourage test taking. Another tactic used by administrators in low SES districts was telling parents that without a 95% participation rate, there would be a threat of penalties to their state funding, although, thus far, no district has experienced a penalty for lack of compliance.

Parents are using their power and exercising their rights to choose what is best for their child. For those parents that opt out, the view that their child should not be stressed and anxious for a test that does not count was a theme across the districts in this study. For the opt-in parents, the belief that testing is a part of life was their primary decision maker. Parents in low SES districts with low test scores are concerned about the overabundance of test prep, whether their child takes the test or not. Even though the Culvert district according to Superintendent Iams is “underperforming,” Iams is not a proponent for extreme test prep
and made it clear that wasting precious teaching time to focus on skill and drill rote memorization is not going to improve the quality of education for low-performing districts. Iams would like to spend less money on test materials and direct the funds toward the improvement of teaching and learning.

Through the opt-out movement’s call to action, parents spoke out about their child being used to evaluate teachers. Up until April 2019, test scores from the NYS ELA and math tests constituted 40% of a teacher’s evaluation. The outcome was stressed teachers who pressured their students to do well on the tests so their job was not in jeopardy. Test scores were also used to evaluate schools, and the threat of closure loomed overhead creating a toxic environment. Although the state test scores are no longer mandatorily linked to teacher evaluations, some sort of standardized test will be used in their place, and the children’s scores are still a part of evaluating teachers.

Parents are their child’s first educator, and their participation in their child’s education does not end at the school’s front door. Parents are their child’s advocates and outside forces, like testing, are interfering in their relationship. Not all parents made an informed decision to opt out or opt in their child to the NYS tests, but they did consider their personal values and beliefs about education, and the role they play in their child’s education as factors. This study shines a light on the significance of parents and the role they play in their child’s education including the power of their decision to opt out or opt in to solicit change in testing policy.
References


UNDERSTANDING THE TESTING OPT-OUT MOVEMENT


UNDERSTANDING THE TESTING OPT-OUT MOVEMENT


Appendix A
Letter to Superintendents

Dear Superintendent [Name]:

My name is Margaret Paladino, and I am an Ed.D. candidate in the Education Leadership for Diverse Learning Communities program at Molloy College. I have also worked as a middle school English/Language Arts teacher for 12 years at a Catholic School in Rosedale. I am reaching out to you about the possibility of conducting my dissertation research study at one of your elementary schools in the [Name School District]. The research I wish to conduct for my doctoral dissertation involves studying parents’ reasons for opting in or opting out of the New York State Tests and how the principal makes sense of the opt-out rates within his or her school. I would like to interview 16-20 fourth-and fifth-grade parents, as well as the school principal. This project will be conducted under the supervision of Dr. Allison Roda, my dissertation chair at Molloy College.

I am hereby seeking your consent to conduct the parent and principal interviews, from September 2018 through December 2018. In addition, parent participation will be strictly voluntary with signed consent.

The main subject of the research is parents’ beliefs about the opt-out movement and how and why they decide to opt in or out of the New York State tests. The parents, school and district will remain confidential, in compliance with the ethical standards of Molloy College’s Institutional Review Board. This research will be used solely for the purpose of making a scholarly contribution to the field of education. It is my hope that this study may assist policymakers interested in designing more effective assessments and accountability systems as a part of educational reform that improves education.

Upon completion of the study, I will provide the district with a bound copy of the dissertation. Please let me know the best way I can schedule a meeting with you to discuss my study in more detail. Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

Yours sincerely,

Margaret Paladino
166 Park Lane
Massapequa, NY 11758
(631) 464-0020 –cell
mpaladino@lions.molloy.edu
Appendix B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
District Superintendent & Elementary school principal

For all respondents: The study will be explained to the subject by the researcher, the consent will be read, and the subject’s questions answered. The interview will take about 30-60 minutes of their time. The subject will sign the consent form and permission to be audiotaped. A dated and signed copy will be given to the subject.

Brief Project Description: This study examines the reasons parents give for opting out or not opting out their children from the New York State Tests in the fourth and fifth grades. In addition, this dissertation study aims to investigate the flow of information that parents receive from the school, other parents, social media, and the news media.

Today I would like to discuss with you how you communicate with parents about the state assessment exams, and your perceptions of and response to the testing opt out rates.

1. Introduction
   1. Please state your name, position, and experience in education.
   2. How would you describe this district and school to someone who is not familiar with the schools on Long Island?
      Probe: Demographics, location, reputation, community, etc.

II. Communication about State Tests
   1. What is your district’s timeline and procedures for parent communication about the state tests?
      Probe: Dates placed on school calendar, school website, e-blasts, robo-calls, letters sent home, Twitter notifications, etc.
      Probe: Do you use the State Education Department “tool kit” to encourage participation?
   2. What information does your district give the parents about the state assessment? Is it just a list of dates or does it mention curriculum?
      Probe: Is your district going to inform the parents about any changes in the state assessments for the new school year?
      Probe: How much time do teachers spend getting children prepared for the ELA and Math state tests-during class and homework time? Is this something that parents are concerned about in your district?

III. Opt-Out Rates
   1. How do you explain your district’s [high/ medium/low] opt-out rate?
Probe: Are there any differences in the opt-out rates by school or neighborhood, by grade level, by type of test, by student demographics? Explain

Probe: What reasons do you hear from parents about their decisions to opt out vs. not opt out? Too much test prep, takes away from other subjects, content of the tests does not match the curriculum, teachers do not receive the results, used for high-stakes decisions vs. they have to take tests their whole lives, they might as well take the tests, my child wants to take the test, etc.

2. If I was parent in your district, how would I get information about the opt-out movement in general, and about what to do if I want to opt my child out?

Probe: Do you ever get any parents who ask you questions about the tests, or their rights to opt out? If so, please explain.

3. Do you believe parents are under any misconceptions about the rationale and content of the state tests? If yes, please explain.

IV. Future of the Opt-Out Movement

1. What do you see as the future of the opt-out movement in your district?

2. What changes would you like to see at the state and national level regarding the state tests?

Are there any questions that I should have asked that I did not ask? Do you want to add anything to what you said?
Appendix C

Molly College
INFORMED CONSENT FORM/ENGLISH

Title of the study: Towards an Understanding of the Testing Opt-Out Movement: Why Parents Choose to Opt In or Opt Out
Researcher(s): Margaret Paladino
Phone: (631)464-0020 / email: mpaladino@lions.molloy.edu
Sponsor: Dr. Allison Roda

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation is voluntary, which means you can choose whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate or not to participate, there will be no loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Before you make a decision, you will need to know the purpose of the study, the possible risks and benefits of being in the study and what you will have to do if you decide to participate.

What is the purpose of the study?
The purpose of this qualitative study is to make sense of the reasons parents give for opting out or not opting their children out of the New York State tests in the fourth and fifth grade. This dissertation study aims to investigate the flow of information that a group of fourth-and fifth-grade parents receive from the school, other parents, social media, and the news media in three Long Island Districts in Nassau County that have a high, medium, and low opt-out rate. I will also examine superintendents and principals’ perceptions of the opt-out movement in their respective districts.

What is the expected duration of the study?
August 1, 2018-July 31, 2019

What are the procedures/methodology?
I will be conducting my phenomenological dissertation study with a purposive sample of three suburban school districts with a high, a medium, and a low opt-out rate for the fourth- and fifth-grade New York State tests. I will conduct my data collection in one elementary school per district totaling three schools. The focus of my study is to examine parents, superintendents, and principals’ reactions, behaviors, and perceptions of the opt-out movement in the selected schools, as each district is unique in demographics and opt-out rates. The methodology for my data collection is an inquiry-based research design with a constructivist worldview. By utilizing the constructivist lens, I will be gathering my data through personal contact with parents and principals in their normal setting with a focus on the “complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.8). I will make use of the qualitative in-depth, face-to-face interview method with the (a) three superintendents, one from each district, (b) three principals, from one elementary school from each district, and (c) 16-20 parents from each of the three elementary schools to create understanding that does not manipulate variables or test a
hypothesis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The research design will afford me the opportunity to explore deeper meanings from the parents’ perspectives as well as the principals’ perspectives with a *clarity of purpose* as to why some parents participate and others do not participate in the opt-out movement by *listening to the data* (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I selected the methodology of interviews to better understand the phenomenon of the opt-out movement in a real-life setting (Golafshani, 2003).

References

**What are the possible benefits to the subject or to others?**
A benefit to the participants is the opportunity to help influence policy and practice regarding the design of a more effective assessment and accountability system that reports individual growth of the students, and helps to develop a teaching and learning process that is based on sound educational pedagogy, not a high-stakes process that rewards and punishes students, teachers, and schools.

**Are there any reasonably foreseeable risks or discomforts?**
There are no foreseeable risks therefore, the respondents may find the interviews helpful for them to better understand their motives to opt in or opt out of the New York State testing. The questions may ask them to reflect on why they opt in or opt out of the state tests, which may be uncomfortable if they are unaware of the opt-out movement. Also, they may be asked questions about school procedures for sharing information, which may be negative. However, the respondents may enjoy having a voice in the discussion and sharing their opinions and experiences with testing. I will explain that if they do not want to answer a question, they can skip it or end the interview at any time.

**What are the conditions for participation?**
Participation in the study is voluntary. Subjects may choose not to participate, and withdraw from participation at any time during the procedures without penalty.

**Will I have to pay for anything? Will I be paid for being in this study?**
There are no costs associated with participating in this study. If you decide to participate in this study, you will not receive compensation.

**Who can I call with questions or if I’m concerned about my rights as a research subject?**
If you have questions, concerns or complaints regarding your participation in this research study or if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you should speak with the researcher. If the researcher cannot be reached or you want to talk to someone other than the person working on the study, you may contact the Office of Institutional Research at Molloy College with any questions, concerns or complaints by emailing irb@molloy.edu.

**How, and the extent to which, confidentiality will be maintained?**

This research is confidential, which means that the research data collected will be kept in a secure location at Molloy College and shared only with the people connected with the study who are authorized to see it. While the use of quotes will supplement the information gleaned through coding, confidentiality will be maintained through the use of pseudonyms, as individual names, schools, and districts will not be revealed in the transcript or any future reports. The sessions will be audio recorded for the purpose of transcribing; the audio files will be deleted at the end of the study.

The actual records of the audio-recorded interviews will be kept at Molloy College and will not be distribute to anyone else.

An explanation of the procedures to be employed in this study, in which I have voluntarily agreed to participate, has been offered to me. All my inquiries concerning the study have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that the information collected will be held in confidence, and that my name will not in any way be identified. I understand that additional information about the study results will be provided, at its conclusion, upon my request. I know that I am free to withdraw from this study without penalty at any time.

The above information has been provided to me (check one)

____ In writing       ____ Orally

**Race/ethnicity:**

White_______
Black_______
Hispanic____
Choose not to respond_______

**By signing this form, I give my consent for audiotaping:**

_________________________  __________________
Signature of subject        Date
And participating in the study:

______________________________________  _____________________
Signature of subject                          Date

______________________________________  _____________________
Signature of researcher                      Date

(OPTIONAL) Complete the following if you wish to receive a copy of the results of this study:

NAME: _____________________________________________________
         (Typed or printed)

ADDRESS:  ____________________________________________________
          (Street)

          (City)          (State)          (Zip)

e-mail (optional) ___________________________________________
Title of the study: Towards an Understanding of the Testing Opt-Out Movement: Why Parents Choose to Opt In or Opt Out

Researcher(s): Margaret Paladino

Phone: (631)464-0020 / email: mpaladino@lions.molloy.edu

Sponsor: Dr. Allison Roda

Interpreter: Alma Rocha

Se te ha invitado a ser parte de un estudio de investigación. Su participación es voluntaria, lo cual significa que usted decide si participa o no. Si usted participa o no participa, no habrá pérdida de beneficios a los que usted tiene derecho. Antes de que decida, usted necesita saber el propósito del estudio, los posibles riesgos y beneficios de estar en el estudio, y que tiene que hacer si decide participar.

¿Cuál es el propósito del estudio?
El propósito de este estudio cualitativo es entender las razones que los padres dan al optar porque sus niños no tomen el examen o que tomen el examen del estado de Nueva York en cuarto y quinto grado. Este estudio tiene como fin investigar la corriente de información que el grupo de padres de estudiantes del cuarto y quinto grado reciben de la escuela, de otros padres, de los medios sociales, y de las noticias en periódicos o televisión, en tres distritos del condado de Nassau en Long Island. Estos tres distritos tienen como diferencia un porcentaje de incidencia alta, media y baja de estudiantes para quienes los padres deciden no tomar los exámenes o tomar los exámenes. También examinare la posición del superintendente y los directores de dichas escuelas en cuanto el movimiento de optar.

¿Cuál es la duración aproximada del estudio?
Agosto 1, 2018, a Julio 31, 2019

¿Cuáles son los procedimientos y la metodología?
Conduciré mi investigación fenomenológica con una muestra propuesta de tres distritos en los que se han detectado un porcentaje de participación alto, medio o bajo de padres en el movimiento de optar para que sus hijos no tomen o tomen el examen del estado de Nueva York en cuarto y quinto grado. El enfoque de mi estudio es examinar las reacciones, conductas y percepciones de padres, superintendentes, y directores del movimiento de optar en las tres escuelas elementales seleccionadas, sabiendo que cada uno de los tres distritos seleccionados tiene una composición demográfica y un porcentaje de optar por no tomar los exámenes, o tomar los exámenes. La metodología para coleccionar datos en mi estudio, es un diseño de investigación basado en preguntas con un punto de vista constructivista. Utilizando un enfoque constructivista, reuniré los datos a través de contacto personal con padres y directores en su ambiente natural enfocándome en la “complexidad de puntos de vista en
lugar de forzar información a unas pocas categorías” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p.). Utilizare un método cualitativo profundo, entrevistando cara-a-cara a (a) tres superintendentes, uno de cada distrito, (b) tres directores, uno de cada una de las escuelas primarias y de cada uno de los distritos, y (c) 16 a 20 padres de cada una de las escuelas primarias, para crear un entendimiento sin manipular variables, o probar hipótesis (Straus & Corbin, 1990). El diseño de investigación me dará la oportunidad de explorar las decisiones de los padres más a fondo al igual que las decisiones de los directores aclarando su posición más a fondo del porque algunos padres participan y otros no en el movimiento de optar escuchando sus respuestas (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Seleccione la metodología de entrevistas para tener un mayor entendimiento del fenómeno del movimiento de optar observándolo en situaciones de la vida real (Golafshani, 2003).

Referencias

¿Cuál es el beneficio de los participantes hacia ellos mismos o hacia otros?
Un beneficio para los participantes es la oportunidad de ayudar a influenciar política y practica con respecto a un diseño más efectivo de los exámenes y al sistema que involucre el progreso individual de los estudiantes, y que ayude a desarrollar un proceso de enseñar y aprender que esté basado en pedagogía educativa, no en un proceso que premia y castiga a estudiantes, maestros y escuelas.

¿Hay posibilidad de algún riesgo o preocupación?
No hay posibilidad de riesgos, sin embargo, los participantes pueden pensar que las entrevistas les han ayudado a entender mejor los motivos por los que optan a que sus hijos no tomen los exámenes o tomen los exámenes del estado de Nueva York. Las preguntas pueden animarles a que piensen y reflexionen acerca del porque optan a que sus hijos no tomen o que tomen los exámenes del estado, lo que puede crear incomodidad si ellos no están enterados del movimiento de optar. También, ellos pueden preguntar acerca de los procedimientos de la escuela para compartir esta clase de información con los padres, lo que puede tener un efecto negativo. Sin embargo, los participantes pueden apreciar el tener voz en la discusión y compartir sus opiniones y experiencias con respecto a los exámenes. Yo explicare que, si ellos no quieren responder a alguna pregunta, ellos pueden saltarla o terminar la entrevista al momento que ellos quieran.

¿Cuáles son las condiciones para participar?
La participación en el estudio es voluntaria. Los participantes pueden elegir no participar, y retirarse de participar a cualquier momento del proceso sin ninguna consecuencia.
¿Tendré que pagar por algo al participar en el estudio? ¿Me pagarán por participar en el estudio?
No hay costo asociado con la participación en el estudio. Si usted decide participar en el estudio, usted no recibirá ninguna compensación.

¿A quién puedo llamar si tengo preguntas o si estoy preocupado acerca de mis derechos al participar en la investigación?
Si usted tiene preguntas, preocupaciones o quejas con respecto a su participación en este estudio de investigación o si tiene alguna pregunta acerca de sus derechos como participante, usted debería hablar con el investigador. Si no puede comunicarse con el investigador o si usted quiere hablar con otra persona que no esté haciendo las preguntas, puede comunicarse a la Oficina de Investigación Institucional en el Colegio Molloy para manifestar sus preguntas, preocupaciones o quejas, mandando un correo electrónico a irb@molloy.edu.

¿Cómo y de qué forma se mantendrá la confidencialidad?
Esta investigación es confidencial, lo que significa que los datos obtenidos en la misma se mantendrán en un lugar seguro en el Colegio Molloy y se compartirán únicamente con personas conectadas con el estudio y que está autorizada a ver y leerlos. Mientras el uso de frases complementará la información obtenida y agrupada en códigos, se mantendrá la confidencialidad a través del uso de seudónimos. Los seudónimos mantendrán el anonimato y se referirán al nombre de personas, escuelas y distritos utilizados en las transcripciones y futuros reportes. Las sesiones se audio-gravarán con el propósito de transferir toda la información. Las grabaciones se borrarán al final del estudio.

Las audio-grabaciones actuales de las entrevistas se mantendrán en el Colegio Molloy y no se distribuirán a nadie.

Se me ha dado una explicación acerca del proceso empleado en este estudio, en el cual yo decidí participar voluntariamente. Todas las preguntas que yo tenía acerca del estudio, las he contestado satisfactoriamente. Entiendo que la información que yo de, será mantenida confidencialmente, y que mi nombre no se identificará. Entiendo que me darán la información adicional acerca de los resultados del estudio si yo la solicito. También estoy enterado de que, si en algún momento decidí retirarme del estudio, tengo la libertad de hacerlo sin ninguna consecuencia y a cualquier momento.

Se me proporciono la información anterior (Marque una)

____ Por escrito       ____ Oralmente

Raza/etnia:
Blanca_____
Negra/Negro_____
Hispana/Hispano  
Elige no responder  

Al firmar esta forma, doy permiso para grabar esta conversación:

__________________________  ____________________
Firma del Participante  Fecha

Y participando en el estudio:

__________________________  ____________________
Firma del Participante  Fecha

__________________________  ____________________
Firma del investigador  Fecha

(OPCIONAL) Complete los datos siguientes si quiere recibir una copia de los resultados de este estudio:

NOMBRE:  ____________________________  
            (Utilice letra de imprenta)

DIRECCION:  __________________________________
            (Calle)

                        (Ciudad)  (Estado)  (Zona Postal)
e-mail (opcional)  __________________________________
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL/ENGLISH

Parents

For all respondents: The study will be explained to the subject by the researcher, the consent will be read, and the subject’s questions answered. The interview will take about 30-60 minutes of their time. The subject will sign the consent form and permission to be audiotaped. A dated and signed copy will be given to the subject.

**Brief Project Description:** This study examines the reasons parents give for opting out or not opting out their children from the New York State Tests in grades 4 and 5. In addition, this dissertation study aims to investigate the flow of information that parents receive from the school, other parents, social media, and the news media.

*Today I would like to discuss the reasons you have for opting out or not opting out your children from the New York State Tests and the communication between you and your school about the opt out movement.*

**I. Introduction**

1. Can you start by stating your name, how many children you have in the school, and their grade levels?
   **Probe:** How long have you lived in the district?
   **Probe:** What prior knowledge, if any, do you have about the district or the school before you moved here?

2. How would you describe this district and school to someone who is not familiar with the schools on Long Island?
   **Probe:** Demographics, location, reputation, community, etc.
   **Probe:** Did you grow up here?

**II. Communication about State Tests**

1. What are your district’s procedures for parent communication about state tests?
   **Probe:** Dates placed on school calendar, school website, e-blasts, robo-calls, letters sent home, Twitter notifications, etc.
   **Probe:** What specific information does your school give you about the test?

2. What types of test prep do the teachers have the students do—in class or homework before the tests?
   **Probe:** Do you feel the prep time is too much, too little, or just right?
   **Probe:** Does your child/children ever talk about the prepping? Please explain?

3. Do you follow any social media groups that talk about the opt out movement?
   **Probe:** Facebook page, Twitter, Long Island Opt Out?
Probe: [If applicable] What role has social media played in your decision to opt out or not opt out?

III. Opting Out or not Opting Out

1. What is your experience as a parent in a [high/medium/low] opt-out district?
   Probe: Do you have any sense about the district or school’s stance on the tests or parent’s rights to opt out (e.g. encourage or discourage parents to opt out)?
   Probe: Are there any disadvantages for children who opt out—e.g. eligibility for specialized programs that use the test scores for admission?

2. How and when did you first hear about opting out?
   Probe: Why do you think the opt out rates are so high on Long Island compared to other places [race, class, SES, etc].

3. How do you communicate your choice to opt out or not opt out to the school?
   Probe: You write a letter, the school has a form letter, the child just says no to the test, etc.

4. Explain why you chose to opt out or not opt out your child[ren].
   Probe: Too much test prep, takes away from other subjects, content of the tests does not match the curriculum, teachers do not receive the results, used for high-stakes decisions vs. they have to take tests their whole lives, they might as well take the tests, my child wants to take the test, we need to have data on our child’s achievement, etc.
   Probe: Is this the first year you will opt out or not? Please explain.

5. If you opted out, is it from both ELA and math or just one? Please explain why?
   Probe: If you have more than one child eligible for the tests, do you opt out or not opt out both? Please explain.

III. Future of the Opt-out Movement

1. Do you follow the movement on social media, and are you involved in an activist role?

2. Compared to previous years, do you know more or less parents who opt out their children from the state tests?
   Probe: Did the changes in the test have an effect on their decision?

3. In what ways do you view the opt out movement as a successful or not successful social movement?
   Probe: Did the test change for the better, is the state moving in the right direction, do you think parents trust that future changes are coming?
4. What do you think will happen in the future of state testing and the opt out movement?  
   **Probe:** less prep, less questions, more age appropriate questions, change in timing?
Para todos los que respondan: El investigador le explicará el estudio al sujeto, le leerá el consentimiento, y responderá a las preguntas de este. La entrevista tomará entre 30 y 60 minutos de su tiempo. El sujeto firmará la forma de consentimiento y el permiso para audio-gravar la entrevista. El sujeto recibirá una copia de estos documentos firmados y fechados.

Breve descripción del proyecto: Este estudio examina las razones que dan los padres cuando su opción es que sus hijos no tomen los exámenes o que tomen los Exámenes del Estado de Nueva York, en 4to y 5to grado. Además, este estudio tiene como objetivo investigar la corriente de información que los padres reciben de la escuela, otros padres, el medio social, y por medio de las noticias.

Hoy me gustaría discutir las razones que usted tiene para que sus niños no tomen o tomen los Exámenes del Estado de Nueva York, y la comunicación entre usted y su escuela acerca del movimiento de opción.

I. Introducción
1. ¿Podría empezar por decirme su nombre, cuantos niños tiene en la escuela, y los grados en que están?
   Probe: ¿Cuánto tiempo tiene viviendo en el distrito?
   Probe: ¿Usted sabía algo, o no, del distrito escolar antes de cambiarse a este distrito?
2. ¿Cómo le describiría este distrito a alguien que no esté familiarizado con las escuelas en Long Island?
   Probe: Situación demográfica, lugar, reputación, comunidad, etc.
   Probe: ¿Usted creció aquí?

II. Comunicación acerca de los Exámenes del Estado
1. ¿Cuáles son los procedimientos de su distrito para comunicarle a los padres acerca de los exámenes del estado?
   Probe: Fechas marcadas en el calendario escolar, página de internet de la escuela, otra comunicación electrónica, llamadas a los hogares, cartas a los hogares, notificaciones por Twitter, etc.
   Probe: Su distrito le da información específica acerca de los exámenes?
2. ¿Qué tipo de preparación para los exámenes los maestros les dan a los estudiantes, ya sea en clase o como tarea?
   Probe: ¿Usted siente que la preparación es demasiado, muy poco, o está bien?
   Probe: ¿Sus niños alguna vez hablan acerca de la preparación? ¿Podría explicarme?
3. ¿Usted sigue algún grupo del medio social que hable acerca del movimiento de opción?
   Probe: ¿Pagina Facebook, Twitter, Long Island Opt Out?
   Probe: [Si aplica] ¿Qué papel ha desempeñado el medio social en su decisión de que sus niños no tomen o que tomen los exámenes?
III. Opción: Que no tomen o que tomen los exámenes

1. ¿Cuál es su experiencia como padre en un distrito que la opción de que no se tomen los exámenes es [alta/ media/baja]?  
   **Probe:** ¿Tiene usted idea de la posición que tiene el distrito con respecto a los exámenes o a los derechos de los padres en cuanto a decidir si sus niños no toman o toman los exámenes (por ejemplo, el distrito anima a los padres a que se tomen o que no se tomen los exámenes)?  
   **Probe:** ¿Hay alguna desventaja para los niños que no toman los exámenes—por ejemplo, el que no sean elegidos para programas en los cuales se utilizan los resultados de los exámenes como un requisito de admisión?

2. ¿Cómo y cuando oyó usted acerca del movimiento de opción [no tomar los exámenes o tomar los exámenes]?  
   **Probe:** ¿Porque usted cree que los porcentajes del movimiento de opción (que los niños no tomen los exámenes) sean tan altos en Long Island en comparación con otros lugares [raza, clase social, nivel socio-económico, etc.]?

3. ¿Cómo le comunica su decisión de no tomar o tomar los exámenes a su escuela?  
   **Probe:** Escribe una carta, la escuela tiene una carta formal, su niño solo dice que no al presentarle el examen, etc.

4. ¿Podría explicarme porqué eligió que sus niños no tomaran o que toman los exámenes?  
   **Probe:** Mucho tiempo preparándose para los exámenes, el contenido de los exámenes no concuerda con el currículo, los maestros no reciben los resultados, los exámenes se usan para tomar decisiones a alto nivel o, por el contrario, si ellos tienen que tomar exámenes toda la vida, pues que los tomen desde ahora, mis niños quieren tomar el examen, tenemos que tener información acerca de los logros académicos de nuestros niños, etc.  
   **Probe:** ¿Este es el primer año en que decide que sus niños no tomen o que tomen los exámenes? Por favor explique.

5. ¿Si usted decidió que sus hijos no tomaran los exámenes, es por Artes del lenguaje inglés (ELA) y matemáticas o solo uno? Por favor explique.  
   **Probe:** ¿Si usted tiene más de un niño en edad de tomar los exámenes, decidió para los dos? Por favor explique.

IV. El Futuro del Movimiento de Opción

1. ¿Usted sigue el movimiento de opción en los medios sociales y, usted participa activamente en el movimiento?  
2. ¿Comparado a los años anteriores, usted conoce más o menos padres que hayan optado porque sus niños no tomen los exámenes del estado?  
   **Probe:** ¿Usted cree que los cambios que hubo en los exámenes hayan afectado la decisión de algunos padres?

3. ¿En qué forma ve usted que el movimiento de optar tenga éxito o no como un movimiento social?
Probe: ¿Usted cree que el examen mejoró? ¿El estado hizo un cambio en la dirección correcta? ¿Usted cree que los padres confían que futuros cambios están por venir?

4. ¿Qué piensa usted que pasará en el futuro de los exámenes del estado y el movimiento de optar para que no se tomen los exámenes?

Probe: Menos preparación, menos preguntas, más preguntas apropiadas para las edades de los niños, cambios en el tiempo límite para tomar los exámenes.
Date: September 6, 2018
To: Margaret Paladino and Dr. Allison Roda
From: Patricia Eckardt, Ph.D., RN
Chair, Molloy College Institutional Review Board

SUBJECT: MOLLOY IRB REVIEW AND DETERMINATION OF EXPEDITED STATUS
Study Title: Towards an Understanding of the Testing Opt Out Movement
Approved: September 6, 2018 – September 6, 2019
Approval No: 13160112-0906

Dear Ms. Paladino/Dr. Roda:

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Molloy College has reviewed the above-mentioned research proposal and determined that this proposal is approved by the committee.

It is considered an EXPEDITED review per the requirements of Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) regulations for the protection of human subjects (45 CFR 46.110.6 and 45 CFR 46.110.7 categories).

Please note that as Principal Investigator (PI), it is your responsibility to be CITI Certified in both the Responsible Conduct of Research and Human Subjects Research and to submit the evidence in order to conduct your research.

You may proceed with your research. Please submit a report to the committee at the conclusion of your project. Your project is approved for ONE YEAR.

Changes to the Research: It is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to inform the Molloy College IRB of any changes to this research.

A change in the research may change the project from EXPEDITED status that would require communication with the IRB.

Sincerely,

[Signature]