



# Colorado Springs District Removes Most Students from Common Core Testing

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Colorado Springs School District 11 struck a blow against the Common Core by voting to remove the majority of its students from the new, mandatory standardized tests. District 11, which has nearly 30,000 students, announced it plans to randomly test the minimum number of students needed to meet the federal requirement, allowing the rest to opt out.

The school board passed the resolution unanimously, and as a result, only a small number of students will have to take the tests. The resolution also allows parents to opt their child out if randomly assigned.

Author and education expert Jesse Rhodes, an associate professor of political science at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, says he thinks the district chose this tactic for several reasons. “At a broad level, the Common Core has become increasingly unpopular,” Rhodes notes, “and the district's action would ostensibly reduce the Core's impact by limiting the extent to which students are exposed to the tests. More broadly, this would allow the district to reduce the amount of time, resources, and money spent on administering the tests, by focusing testing on the randomly selected subset of students.”

## Teaching Core Still Required

This measure is a transitional compromise while the district looks for new ways to test students' progress, according to the school board. Supporters of the resolution hope this would mean that teachers would have more freedom and flexibility to work in the classroom without the need to put emphasis first and foremost on teaching to the test. Rhodes, however, says he is not entirely convinced this resolution marks a significant change.

“At first blush, this would seem to address parents' frustration with the increasing influence of standardized testing in schools,” says Rhodes. “In reality, however, it wouldn't: because a randomly selected group of students would still have to take the tests, and teachers would have to continue to teach Common Core-related materials to all students, to ensure that any randomly selected sample would do well.”

Neal McCluskey, an education research fellow at the Cato Institute, echoed that worry, noting although the new policy will make many students and parents happy, it will not allow for more innovative teaching.

“I think they went with that because it kept with the spirit of testing—assess how the district is doing—without burdening every student and school with onerous, disruptive testing,” McCluskey said.

“It’s not at all surprising that research suggests that the more state and federally mandated testing there is, the more distanced parents feel from their local schools. It’s because they *are* more distanced; they have less input over what is taught, how it is taught, how it is assessed, and what it means for their children,” he added.

“Only Oklahoma has been punished for leaving the Core, though others may well feel it is too dangerous to leave,” said McCluskey. “And statistical sampling should be random, so a ‘teaching to the test’ strategy would have to still teach everyone to the test because teachers wouldn’t know who would ultimately be selected to be tested. In other words, it shouldn’t affect the approach to teaching—they’ll teach to the test or not regardless of who is tested.”

### **Fear of Punishment**

Colorado parent Anita Stapleton shares this concern. Stapleton, a grassroots activist with Colorado Against Common Core, says she is furious Colorado “sold out” to the federal government even though its unique state constitution allows for local control. Like many parents, she fears an uphill battle with Common Core, partly because parents believe they will be punished for taking a stand against standardized tests.

“The Colorado Department of Education has been lying to our district about the state statute that mandates the testing, telling districts they don’t have the parental refusal right,” said Stapleton, who encourages other parents to refuse to let their kids take standardized tests. “An opt-out option is better, because then the schools have to develop alternative testing models. Refusing to test is a form of civil disobedience, and parents are being punished for this.”