Standardized testing: Clarifying importance and procedures

February 2013

This FAQ is intended as a support to principals and teachers to understand State of Oregon requirements and our practices around testing.

Q: Why is it important for students to take their OAKS tests?

A: There are several key reasons why students are required to take the OAKS tests:

- The tests measure how well students have learned what they need to know in each subject, giving students, parents, teachers and schools valuable information about students’ mastery of material.
- The tests are an important measure of how well a school is serving students and what improvements may be needed.
- The tests are used by the state to rate schools – both on how well students do overall and also on how many students take the tests. If a school falls below 95% participation, the school’s state rating falls. The ratings are made public in the school’s State Report Card and are often used by parents weighing school choices.
- Most students use the Reading and Writing OAKS tests in 11th grade to meet their high school graduation requirement of showing mastery in these Essential Skills. The Class of 2014 and beyond must also pass Math tests. If students refuse to test prior to the 11th grade, they will have limited familiarity with the testing environment when they first have their opportunity in high school. This could negatively impact their performance and their on-time graduation.

Q: In what ways is testing a racial equity issue with different stakes for students of color, students with disabilities and students in poverty?

A: These historically under-served students may already face barriers to academic progress, high school completion and college admission. Refusing to test could compound barriers for students, including requiring costly make up tests to meet state diploma requirements in Essential Skills. Campaigns or peer pressure to get students to boycott tests can therefore disparately impact these students.

Q: How does a student gain an exemption from taking the tests?

A: Parents are allowed to request test exemption based on disability or for religious reasons.

For a school to excuse a student under this rule, the parent must provide a written request listing the reasons for the request and propose an alternative learning activity for the student to do during the testing that would meet the same goals as participation in the state assessment. An example of an activity might be that the student work on homework or a special assignment covering the same set of skills being tested.

The school may then consider the parent’s suggested activity but choose instead to engage the student in a different activity that the school determines. The point of having the parent suggest an alternate activity is to help emphasize the educational value and importance of the assessment.
In past practice, the principal approves the request, and the school test coordinator makes sure either to block the student from testing in OAKS or talks with the teachers to ensure that testing of the student does not happen. The school retains a copy of the parent letter and sends a copy to PPS Research & Evaluation. The parent request letter should be submitted as early in the school year as possible, and it must be renewed every year, if the parent wishes to continue to exempt the student.

**Q: What if a parent writes a letter refusing for a student to be tested, but not stating a religious or disability-based exemption? Is this allowable?**

**A:** The state statute does not recognize a parent’s testing refusal as a legitimate exemption from testing. The only recognized exemptions are for religious reasons or due to a student’s disability as described above.

However, if a parent does wish to refuse testing on behalf of their child, they must also follow the steps outlined in the prior question.

We then ask that the principal discuss with the parent the reasons why we require students to take tests (refer to the first and second questions/answers on this sheet). We want parents to make informed decisions and be aware of the consequences of students not taking tests, including the influence that their decision can have on the student’s classmates.

If a parent continues to refuse testing, schools should either use the alternate activity suggested by the parent or choose one that suits the student and school.

**Q: Can students refuse to test on their own without a parent’s approval?**

**A:** If a parent or guardian is listed on the student’s registration form, that parent must be the one to request a formal exemption.

**Q: What if students are encouraging other students to boycott testing?**

**A:** Principals, teachers and schools must clearly assert that students must not coerce or in any way intimidate other students to share their position or their actions on testing. Schools should follow their anti-bullying protocols to intervene with students who engage in such behavior.

**Q: Does a legitimate exemption or a refusal count against my school’s test participation rate?**

**A:** Any student enrolled on the first instructional day in May and for at least one-half of the school year who does not test, regardless of the reason, counts against the school’s participation rate.