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Refusing the Test

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Please read this brief, fictionalized case study[i] about the dilemmas posed by opting out:

Over the past year, Principal Cora Lewin had become aware of the growing number of students and families "opting out" of state assessments in Colorado. This trend started in a few suburban districts outside Denver in 2014-2015, but had quickly become an issue of statewide concern. While opt out numbers had increased, her school had remained fairly insulated from debates about testing. Her school, "Mountain View" was a K-8 school in Oak Park, a neighborhood in north Denver. Opt out rates had been fairly low in the Denver Public Schools and almost non-existent at Mountain View. Lewin, shaking her head, had to admit that she hadn't really thought much about this issue, and had largely dismissed it as a situation that her suburban colleagues had to deal with. All that had changed this year. She had been asked to have a surprising number of meetings with parents to discuss their concerns about testing. And, in recent weeks, parents had started to turn in their "refusal" forms. Now it was almost March; spring testing season was a little over a month away. Between the refusal forms she'd already received, and her sense of parents' views, Lewin anticipated that almost half of students in Grades 3-8 were not going to take the spring exams.

Lewin sighed heavily, straightening the papers on her desk before the start of her school day. She wasn't sure how these refusals would play out. The opt-out issue had quickly become a topic of tension and division at the school. Yet, parents had diverse reasons for wanting to opt out. Some saw the tests as an unnecessary distraction from real learning. Others worried about the amount of time spent on testing (generally about 5-6 school days each spring, spread across two weeks) and the ways in which teachers focused classroom time on reviewing for the tests each spring. Lewin had also heard about the growing pressure that students felt to do well on the tests, as well as concerns about data privacy, and the role played by private test developers. But parents were by no means unanimous in their thinking. Some argued that the school needed (and deserved) to show how it was doing, especially given its good work to improve outcomes for lower-income kids. What might happen with a bunch of kids--especially the ones likely to post strong test scores--opted out? How would this make the school look?

Many of these concerns resonated with Lewin. As a younger teacher, she had worked in a number of schools where chronic low achievement remained largely invisible. While skeptical of some of education reform movements in the district, Lewin saw that many low-income students and students of color had benefited from the district's "unrelenting focus" on raising student achievement. In particular, she applauded the district's work to direct more resources (literacy coaches and staffing to lower class sizes in the early grades) to schools that were struggling academically. At the same time, Lewin understood some of the opposition to the tests. Too often, the tests had been used to identify schools as 'failing' and had ushered in policies designed to close the lowest performing schools and open up new schools of choice.

While Mountain View had done well enough on the tests to stay out of the reform spotlight, Lewin still felt pressure from the district to raise the school's performance. The school's test scores had been "fair," but low enough to receive a "Watch" rating on the district's accountability framework. Lewin was particularly troubled by a stubborn test score gap between students that qualified for free and reduced

lunch (FRL) and those who did not. Mountain View's test scores did not perfectly correlate with family income, but closely tracked divisions in the school, by class, race and language. These class divisions had grown more pronounced over Lewin's five years as a principal. Mountain View's surrounding neighborhood, 'Oak Park,' was a diverse and working-class neighborhood in Denver, however, the neighborhood had faced pressure from the wave of gentrification, displacing many of the neighborhood's families.

She was also seeing some of these divisions in debates about opting out. Most (but certainly not all) of the parents who had turned in these letters were White, and almost all were among the middle-class professionals and newer families in the school and neighborhood. Mountain View had 45% of its students qualify for free and reduced lunch, and enrolled families who were approximately 20% African-American, 25% Latino, 50% White, and 5% Asian. These demographics had shifted fairly dramatically in her tenure at the school; when she started, the school had about 70% of families that qualified for free and reduced lunch. While not one of the most "sought after" schools in the district, Mountain View had a good reputation in the neighborhood, and Lewin had been given credit for putting the school on a stronger footing. However, the school's improving reputation—and neighborhood housing pressures—had contributed to the many new families choosing the school, and occasional moments of tension between newer and older families at the school. Newer families, for example, were often unaware of Denver's long and contentious history of school segregation.

Thus far, Lewin had been able to navigate through these complex dynamics. Yet, the opt-out issue was quickly becoming a topic of tension and division at the school, particularly on the school's advisory board and in PTA meetings. While seeing both sides of the situation, Lewin felt more and more pressure to offer clear feedback to parents. "What information should we give," she'd asked, and "what case do we make?" Her phone call yesterday with Dr. Benson, the district's longtime head of assessment, offered little help. The new state law, he noted, "prevents you from encouraging parents to opt out." But, he added, "you can't discourage them either." The district needed the data, and valued it, but they had tried to say "as little as possible." Indeed, Lewin remembered the official email that the district had sent a few weeks ago, formally notifying parents of their legal "right to refuse" to have their child take state exams. It was assiduously neutral and very brief.

The tension surrounding opt out in her community was weighing on Lewin. Testing season was coming up fast, and she was feeling pressure from parents and teachers to take a stand. The school's advisory board wanted her to convene an all-school meeting to answer parents' questions about testing. She'd promised them that she would have more information after talking to the district. She also knew that teachers expected more guidance at this week's faculty meeting. Just to herself, she admitted feeling a sense of responsibility. It felt wrong to try to wash her hands of the controversy; teachers and parents were looking to her for guidance. She also didn't want the issue to fracture the school's sense of community and purpose. While respecting parents' rights to direct their children's education, Lewin also had a sense that attending public school came with certain shared obligations. She glanced up at the clock: 7:35 am. Soon, parents would be stopping by her office after dropping off their kids. How might she respond to parent and teacher concerns? How should she proceed?

After reading the case, please gather into small groups (no more than 5-6 people) and discuss:

1. What is the dilemma in this case?
2. How might Principal Lewin respond?

[i] This abbreviated case was adapted from a longer version: "Refusing the Test: Debating Assessment and Accountability in Public Education," written by Terri S. Wilson and Matthew Hastings.