

**MAKING A  
MEASURABLE  
DIFFERENCE:** CASE STUDIES FROM  
THE HIGH-QUALITY ASSESSMENT PROJECT



ENGAGING  
STUDENTS  
TO OPT IN  
FOR A GREAT  
EDUCATION



With many states adopting higher quality tests to measure important student skills—such as writing, problem-solving and critical thinking—this study shares lessons from a campaign in Washington State that encouraged high school students as the spokespeople for discouraging fellow students from opting out of tests.



PREPARED BY



**INTRODUCTION:** In 2011, Washington adopted the Common Core State Standards in English language arts (ELA) and math. During the 2014-15 school year, the state transitioned to the Smarter Balanced assessments as a means to measure student achievement against those standards. The assessments were administered statewide for the first time in the spring of 2015, and nearly 50 percent of 11th graders refused to take the test in one or both subjects. By comparison, test refusal rates were no more than 5 percent for students in other grades.

**Ready Washington**—a statewide coalition of education agencies and advocates led by Partnership for Learning (the education foundation of the Washington Roundtable) and the State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction—sought to better understand what was driving high school test refusals and design a public awareness campaign that would encourage increased participation.



*Campaign Branding*

The *Opt In for Student Success* campaign—an outreach effort aimed at amplifying student voices in support of the assessments—was a key piece of that push.

This briefing paper offers lessons learned from the *Opt In for Student Success* effort, specifically sharing the rationale for a student-focused campaign, the strategies and tactics used to engage students in promoting a positive narrative and observations that could be applied to future outreach.

**WASHINGTON STATE STUDENT PARTICIPATION DATA 2015**

	ELA PARTICIPATION %	MATH PARTICIPATION %
GRADE 3	98.2%	98.1%
GRADE 4	98.1%	98.1%
GRADE 5	98.1%	98.1%
GRADE 6	98.0%	97.8%
GRADE 7	97.3%	97.3%
GRADE 8	96.9%	96.6%
GRADE 10	97.1%	NA
GRADE 11	53.3%	49.6%
GRADE 3-8 & 11 (AYP)	91.6%	90.9%

Source: OSPI

## UNDERSTANDING THE ROOTS OF WASHINGTON'S *OPT OUT* MOVEMENT

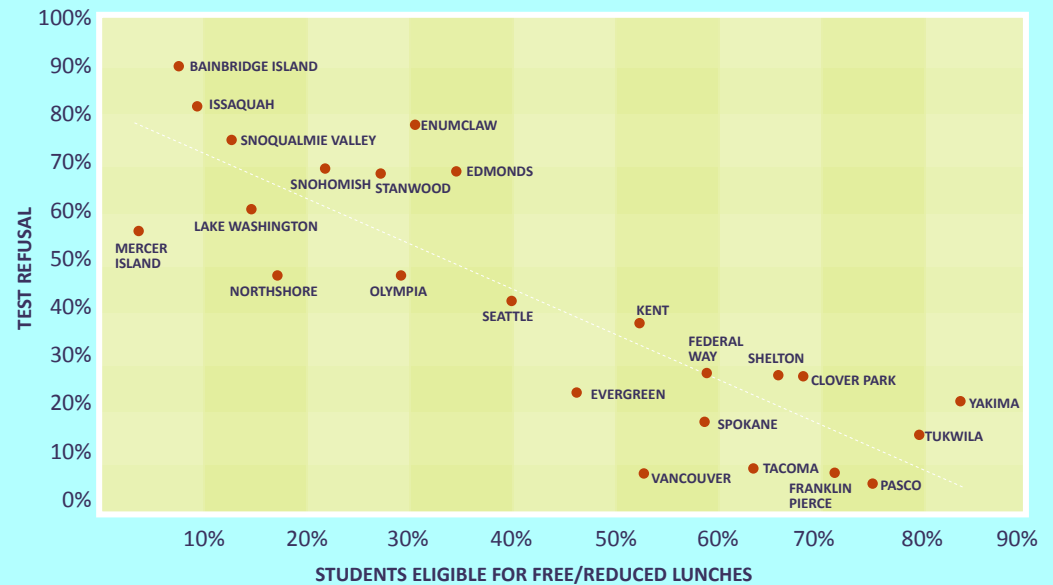
*To design an effective campaign—one that would reach the right audiences with the right messages—Ready Washington first needed to learn more about who was opting out and why. Research was conducted to understand:*

- Which students were refusing to take the test
- What level of information they and their families had about the assessments' design and purpose
- What messages were most effective in encouraging high school students to take the assessments (which were federally mandated, but not yet required for graduation)

*“ I feel like less people would opt out if they knew more about how the test worked and what it was for, because I know we didn't really get told anything about it. It was just like, 'You're taking this test. Here you go!' ”*

*Student Focus Group Participant, Oct. 2015*

### 11th GRADE TEST REFUSAL



A review of 2015 test participation data revealed that test refusals were most prevalent in wealthier suburban school districts, such as Bainbridge Island, Issaquah and Bellevue.

By comparison, lower-income districts, such as Tacoma and Franklin Pierce in the south Puget Sound region and Pasco in eastern Washington, had lower refusal rates.

Ready Washington commissioned a statewide telephone survey and student and parent focus groups in the fall of 2015 to learn more. This research exposed a general lack of awareness and understanding of the tests.

***Among the key findings:***

- Only 3 in 10 respondents reported having “a lot” or “some” exposure to communications about the test as compared to 43 percent who had seen, read or heard “nothing at all.”
- Although awareness of Smarter Balanced was low, more than two-thirds of survey respondents believed that all students should take the new tests.
- Parents in wealthier areas expressed concern about overtesting, and parents preferred their juniors concentrate on the SAT, ACT and AP exams also offered during the spring.
- Students were generally unaware of how teachers and parents use the test scores to understand their progress. Many students did not know that a score of 3 or 4 could qualify them for credit-bearing coursework in college. (In 2014, Washington’s community and technical colleges, four-year public universities and independent colleges agreed to begin using Smarter Balanced scores to place students in entry-level college courses, thus allowing students to bypass other placement tests.)
- Messages that focused on explaining immediate student benefits from the test, such as avoiding remediation in college, were most compelling. Other well-received messages explained differences between the new and old tests and outlined the increased quality of resulting data.
- Respondents were less enthusiastic about messages that emphasized the long-term benefits of Smarter Balanced and the ability of test data to mitigate inequities.

**BUILDING THE STUDENT  
VOICE IN SUPPORT OF  
TEST PARTICIPATION**

Based on this research, Ready Washington concluded that Washington needed a concentrated communications campaign that would foster a positive narrative, encourage test participation and promote the value of the resulting data. Empowering students as the primary voices in that effort was essential.

***Ready Washington wanted students to hear from their peers why the test was valuable and what it meant in the larger context of their education-to-career journey.***

## BUILT TO SUCCEED: CHALLENGES TO ADDRESS AND PRINCIPLES TO ADVANCE

### *Ready Washington identified three potential challenges in building a campaign plan based on student engagement:*

- 1** The competition for student attention is intense. In the era of constant digital communication, high school students are conditioned to ignore external messages and marketing that doesn't speak directly to them.
- 2** Research clearly showed that awareness of the new assessments was low, and this issue likely wasn't a high priority for teenagers nor was it particularly exciting to them. Any strategy needed to encourage action and a way for students to see themselves in the campaign.
- 3** The traditional mode of reaching students—using adult voices and distributing messages through districts, schools and parent networks—would likely be insufficient and could be seen as patronizing. In addition to other outreach efforts, any campaign would need a communications channel that reached students directly.

### *In considering these challenges, Ready Washington based its campaign on three principles:*

- 1** **Make it student-centered.** This campaign needed to be different from adult-focused campaigns that Ready Washington had previously deployed. Creative materials and messages needed to speak to students and grab their attention through bright, eye-catching graphics that were light on text.
- 2** **Encourage students to share their own voices.** Research indicated which messages would likely have the most impact on students. However, the biggest opportunity to build engagement was to encourage students to create their own supportive video content that could be easily shared and promoted.
- 3** **Reach students where they are.** According to the Pew Research Center 9 in 10 American teenagers go online using a mobile device daily and nearly three-quarters have a smartphone and use social media. These platforms provided the highest leverage opportunity to engage students.

## READY, SET, GO: *OPT IN FOR STUDENT SUCCESS*

Ready Washington created and rolled out the *Opt In for Student Success* campaign in conjunction with the spring of 2016 testing window. This effort included development of a suite of bright, colorful creative assets, all of which delivered key messages and were optimized for promotion to students and secondary audiences through social media.

**The campaign included many elements, using diverse media and communication channels:**

*Pre-packaged Fact Sheets & Graphics:*

**TOP 3 REASONS TO TAKE ASSESSMENTS**

- 1 KNOW NOW IF YOU ARE READY FOR COLLEGE OR WORK.** If you score a 3 or high assessment, you're on or career and can qualify in college and avoid the cost of high school level classes.
- 2 KNOW IF YOU NEED EXTRA HELP OR CAN TAKE ADVANCED CLASSES.** The Smarter Balanced measure of how you're doing in school helps you and your family know how to succeed.
- 3 TAKING THE TESTS HELPS TEACHERS, STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS.** The Smarter Balanced measure of how you're doing in school helps you and your family know how to succeed.

**WASHINGTON WILL HAVE MORE THAN 700,000 JOBS IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS. MOST JOBS WILL BE FILLED BY PEOPLE WHO HAVE A POSTSECONDARY CREDENTIAL OR EXPERIENCE.**

But how do we know if you're ready? If you have the skills and knowledge to fill those jobs?

One way teachers and parents measure college and career readiness is through assessments.

In our state, we use assessments, which solve and critical of a student's future in

**WHAT STUDENTS ARE SAYING ABOUT BALANCED ASSESSMENTS**

TO HELP STUDENTS better prepare for success after high school, Washington state uses college and career ready learning standards, which define what students should know and be able to do by the end of each grade. One way we measure how well students and schools are performing in meeting the standards is with Smarter Balanced assessments.

Smarter Balanced measures skills like problem solving and critical thinking that are important to a student's future when they attend college or technical training and enter the workplace.

**WHY SHOULD STUDENTS TAKE THE SMARTER BALANCED ASSESSMENTS? HERE'S WHAT STUDENTS ACROSS WASHINGTON SAID:**

**"EDUCATION WILL BE THE FOUNDATION** that I build the rest of my life on. A good education will help me to know what my strengths and weaknesses are, and it will show me the opportunities that lay ahead. That's why I'm opting in for a better education."

**ELIZABETH MINN, 11TH GRADER**  
Decker High School (Federal Way)

**"MY GOAL AND DREAM IS TO BE** a filmmaker. Most people say a test will not help advance an artistic career, however there are many moments of much needed math, science and especially writing."

**CADWYN CALBERO, 11TH GRADER**  
Marysville Gardner High School (Marysville)

**"I OPT IN FOR A BETTER EDUCATION** because it will give me access to better classes, better knowledge, better jobs, and a better life. Those are the rewards for working hard."

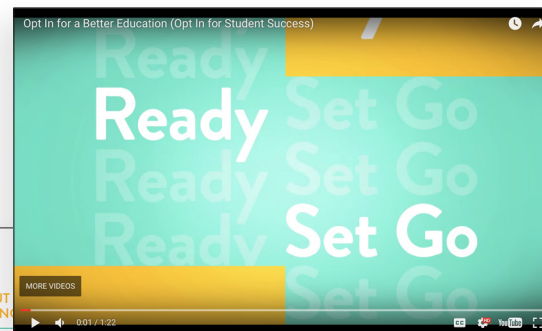
**ETHAN OSWORE, 11TH GRADER**  
Timberline High School (Lacey)

**"I OPT IN FOR A BETTER EDUCATION** because I can be a computer programmer, a computer technician, or a doctor. I want to be ready for college and career so I will be taking the Washington state assessments."

**ANNE HAZEL, 11TH GRADER**  
Mason Si High School (Gig Harbor)

**OPT IN FOR STUDENT SUCCESS**  
www.OptInWA.com

*Videos:*



*Dedicated URL [www.optinwa.com](http://www.optinwa.com) where online viewers access resources:*





The campaign centerpiece was a contest that invited high school students to record and upload a brief video to social media. Students had to use the phrase, “I opt in for a better education...” during the video. As part of the contest, 10 student winners would each be awarded \$500 scholarships. Each winner also would select one teacher to receive a \$100 Visa gift card. The cash stipends were intended to motivate student participation and attract teachers who would encourage students to submit videos.

Starting in early March and lasting six weeks, Ready Washington packaged and shared the student video submissions through its social media channels, with amplification and promotion from coalition members and other supporters.

In addition to social media outreach, Ready Washington provided a toolkit with graphics, suggestions for messaging and guidelines to coalition members and outside partners for easy sharing and promotion. Coalition members also reached out to organizations that weren’t traditional education partners, including One America and Unidos US (formerly the National Council of La Raza) affiliates in Washington, to share these resources and help engage students of color and encourage their participation in the contest.

***The Opt In campaign used various social media platforms to reach different demographics and audiences:***

- With a younger, more engaged user base, Instagram provided the best venue for reaching students. Instagram ads have the benefit of taking up the entire mobile screen, which proved important in grabbing student attention.
- Facebook was a valuable channel for reaching students, but also offered the benefit of reaching wrap-around audiences, including parents, teachers, counselors and school leaders. The additional targeting was a way to encourage third-party validation from sources students trusted.
- Twitter provided a venue for promoting the contest and amplifying student voices among legislators, political activists and education advocacy organizations (stakeholders with whom Ready Washington had engaged historically). We wanted these audiences to hear the positive messages that students were sharing.

Ready Washington sponsored the contest a second time in early 2017. This year, it doubled the scholarship amount and cut the number of winners in half—resulting in twice as many entries as in 2016. Ready Washington also started the campaign earlier in the year, launching it in late January, nearly two months before the start of the spring testing window.

***The earlier spring start date allowed Ready Washington to be more proactive, engage more partners and reach more students. Specifically, starting earlier in 2017 allowed Ready Washington to:***

- Get ahead of a potential test refusal or “opt out” movement, with positive messaging to build awareness, support and engagement in advance of the spring testing window.
- Package and promote student videos throughout the spring testing window, which ran from March to May.
- Do more work with the contest winners, including production of a post-contest video and development of a student op-ed.
- Improve the targeting of paid social media outreach—allowing the campaign to focus ads and promote posts to specific areas of the state where awareness might be low, where the coalition anticipated or saw signs of potential test refusals or where the campaign could feature video submissions from local students.

## MEASURING SUCCESS

In total, the campaign touched more than 2.1 million people, reaching 1.5 million people in 45 days in 2016 and another 600,000 over a similar period in 2017. The effort was developed and delivered with a two-year budget of \$50,000, not including the original public opinion research. It provided a wealth of creative and digital assets that could be used to amplify student voices over time. It also gave Ready Washington members the opportunity to better understand which digital platforms, messages and audiences performed the best for building student engagement.

SNAPSHOT: OPT IN CAMPAIGN REACHES 2.1 MILLION PEOPLE	
FACEBOOK REACH	1,415,204 VIEWS 44,083 ENGAGEMENTS (COMMENTS, LIKES, SHARES)
TWITTER	402,703 IMPRESSIONS
INSTAGRAM	341,728 VIEWS 9,975 ENGAGEMENTS (COMMENTS, LIKES, SHARES)
VIDEO	288,002 VIEWS
WEBSITE TRAFFIC	32,641 VIEWS
TOTALS	2,159,635 REACHED 93,315 SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENTS



## CAMPAIGN SUPPORTS BROADER EFFORTS

*In addition to sponsoring the Opt In campaign, Ready Washington organizes and manages a variety of ongoing outreach efforts to build support for Washington’s education standards and Smarter Balanced assessments. Some components include:*

- Promotion of parent and student resources, including videos, infographics and fact sheets translated into 16 languages—tools that address key questions identified during parent and student focus groups and deliver research-tested messaging.
- Media events to educate reporters about the assessments and clear up misconceptions.
- Full-day messaging workshops for coalition partners, teachers and spokespeople.
- A public radio campaign delivering supporting messages in English and Spanish and targeted print advertisements that promote connections between standards and assessments and preparation for career and life opportunities.
- Support for the teacher voices project, CORElaborate WA, where teachers blog and tweet about their experiences and the value of assessments in helping students prepare for college and career.

## LESSONS AND OBSERVATIONS:

- The engagement rate among 14- to 18-year-olds on Instagram was nearly triple the engagement rate with the same audience on Facebook. Ready Washington will continue to focus on this channel in a future campaign.
- The majority of contest participants surveyed in 2017 reported hearing about the contest from a teacher. Based on this information, the **Opt In** campaign will maintain outreach to wrap-around adult audiences in future engagement efforts, primarily through Facebook with additional targeting on Instagram.
- The campaign did not use a hashtag, such as #OptInWA, during the contest window due to concerns that it could be co-opted by test opponents. However, Ready Washington tested the #OptInWA hashtag in post-contest communications during early 2017, and it wasn’t used negatively. Given this experience, a hashtag will be considered carefully to promote a future campaign and as a means for tracking organic conversations.
- Advertising on Snapchat, a platform used by nearly 8 in 10 American teenagers, was discussed but not employed due to resource constraints. Given Snapchat’s popularity, this platform should be tested as an advertising tool in future student-focused campaigns.
- With additional resources in a future campaign, Ready Washington plans to use location-based mobile advertising (video, banner and audio streaming advertisements) targeted to users in and around areas where research shows that awareness levels or participation rates continue to be low (i.e., schools, districts, cities, etc.).

## PROGRESS AND THE PATH FORWARD

Washington State has made significant progress in quelling the test refusal movement in its school districts, and Ready Washington believes the *Opt In* campaign played a role. Despite efforts by local opposition groups, a greater number of high school students took Smarter Balanced assessments in 2016 over 2015. Including students who passed the test as 10th graders in 2015, 11th grade participation in the ELA test was 88.1 percent and 61.4 percent in the math test.

***These gains are a dramatic improvement in student participation, and Ready Washington attributes them to three factors:***

- 1 The tests are no longer “new.”**
- 2 Washington is transitioning to requiring high school students to meet a benchmark score on the Smarter Balanced tests as a condition for graduation. (Beginning with the class of 2016, a passing score on the Smarter Balanced ELA assessment is required. A passing score on the math test will be required beginning with the class of 2019.)**
- 3 Students and parents are responding to accurate information and positive messaging delivered via a variety of channels from trusted messengers.**

Engaging students and helping them see the value of another test in high school is important—particularly via a medium that speaks directly to them, amplifies their voice and includes content that is easily consumed and shared. Ready Washington will continue the work to engage students and parents and unify education groups as to why standards and aligned assessments are important. The effort will require persistence and seeking new avenues to connect with, and hear from, students, parents, teachers and school leaders.



## ABOUT THE HQAP : HIGH-QUALITY ASSESSMENT PROJECT

Between 2013-2017, the High-Quality Assessment Project—a pooled grantmaking fund created by the Bill & Melinda Gates, Hewlett, Lumina and Schusterman foundations as well as the Helmsley Trust—provided resources to policymakers and advocates around the country to support them in making the transition to higher quality state tests. Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors and Education First managed the fund.

Using grants and technical assistance from HQAP, these state and national leaders engaged in reviews of state test quality, developed materials for better engaging parents and teachers, and commissioned research into public opinion about the importance of testing. Across the country and more deeply in 17 states over HQAP’s four years, grantees educated state boards, legislators, governors and the media, and engaged parents as new tests were adopted and administered and score reports issued.

With the sunset of HQAP, Education First has been working to take stock of lessons learned from this initiative and to make sure the field continues to give access to the varied and helpful tools and information grantees created about test quality.

As part of this work, HQAP commissioned case studies from three grantees—the National Network of State Teachers of the Year, Partnership for Learning/Ready Washington and UnidosUS—to share their work influencing the debates about states tests and their advice for advocates and policymakers. Each of these organizations engaged their constituencies—parents, teachers and students—in different and innovative ways, and it’s worth thinking about how these efforts could be replicated in more states and communities.

Complementing these case studies, Education First has prepared a report summarizing the work of HQAP and lessons learned for continued advocacy on the quality and usability of state tests.

Finally, the Education First website now includes a permanent “best of” library of resources from many HQAP grantees, including rubrics for reviewing the quality of tests, communications tools and infographics to discourage “opting out” and model materials for engaging both parents and policymakers. The case studies and the Education First final can be found at this online resource as well.



Education First is a strategy and policy organization that helps policymakers design and accelerate policies and plans that help all young people succeed in college, careers and life.



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