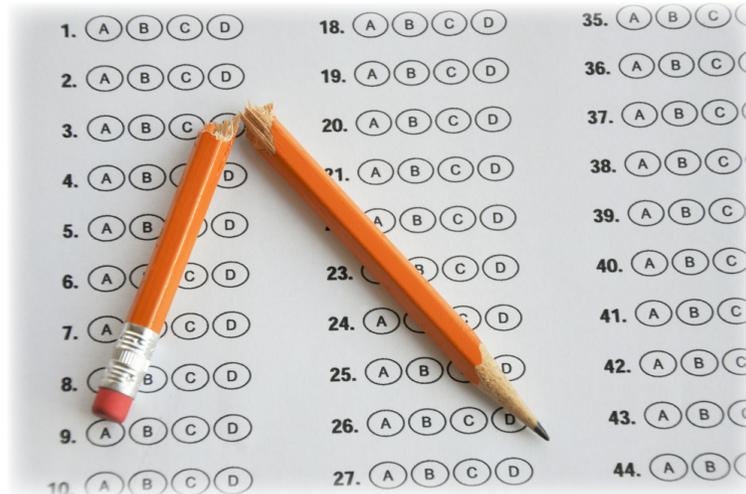




EXAMINING #OPTOUTSOWHITE



Test-based accountability disproportionately impacts Black and Latinx students, who are more likely to attend the schools that face consequences based on assessment results. Meanwhile, the so-called “Opt-Out” movement of parents and students who protest test-based accountability by refusing to take standardized exams is disproportionately White—so much so that in 2016 a Twitter hashtag emerged to describe it: “optoutsowhite.”

Ninety-two percent of respondents to a [2016 survey](#) of Opt-Out activists were White, even though roughly half of American public school students are people of color.

Theories explaining why this might be include the following: (a) that these trends reflect more general trends about political power and efficacy, (b) the sense that people of color do participate but that White people attract far more media and public attention when they opt out, (c) the tendency of some cultures to shy away from questioning the schools, and (d) the political positions of some civil rights groups that support standardized testing as a means for directing attention and resources to educational opportunity gaps between White students and students of color.

It’s an issue, then, that seems to call for further examination.

In a [study](#) published earlier this year in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Education Policy*, Maravene Taylor-Heine and NEPC Fellow [Terri S. Wilson](#), both of the University of Colorado Boulder, did just that. They analyzed over 11 hours of video recordings of a pivotal Opt-Out conference held in Philadelphia in February of 2016. The researchers sought to examine the role and implications of race in the movement’s rhetoric.

Unsurprisingly, the conference participants were disproportionately White, although Taylor-Heine and Wilson note that the organizers “prioritized reaching out to diverse communities and foregrounded concerns of equity and social justice.”

The study found that when race was mentioned, typically by people of color, it was often evoked in a “face-saving” manner that used “apology, deflection, and humor” to put the White audience at ease. For example, in making the point that the movement needed to make a bigger effort to engage people of color, a speaker who identified as Puerto Rican started off with disclaimers, saying: “I don’t mean that as an insult. Every time I say this, people take it as an insult.”

People of color participating in the conference were more likely than White participants to mention their racial identities as they spoke. In doing so, they often (though not always) used the term “we” to reference other members of their racial groups.

White participants, by contrast, were more likely to use a “universalizing” “we” to refer to the movement as a whole. Taylor-Heine and Wilson warn that this tendency has the potential to “disregard crucial perspectives and paper over significant disagreements, rather than achieving solidarity.” They also suggest that people of color participating in the conference—and the movement—faced a “discursive burden” not experienced by their White counterparts:

They were tasked with selecting how to anticipate their audience’s potential discomfort with naming racialized identities. They also had to decide when to invoke racialized identities and when to adopt strategically racially neutral language . . . Our analysis suggests that White activists, by and large, adopted the easy and color-blind ‘we,’ while activists of color did the harder work of weaving together a diverse movement through shifts in self-positioning.

Like others who have studied racial discourse in the context of social movements, Taylor-Heine and Wilson propose that the Opt-Out movement might benefit from spaces where people of color can deliberate alongside and within broader, cross-racial groups. “Such spaces might ease the discursive burdens faced by activists of color or provide a space for them to name and strengthen their own interests outside of racially mixed coalitions,” they conclude.

NEPC Resources on Accountability and Testing

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