

THE CENTER FOR  
ETHICS & EDUCATION

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# Opting Out of State Assessments

TEACHING GUIDE

## USING THIS TEACHING GUIDE

The Center for Ethics & Education created this curriculum plan to give faculty and students the tools to bridge philosophy and education. Specifically, we connected a normative case about opting out of standardized tests to additional readings to help students examine the meaning and value of test scores. This curriculum plan challenges students to consider individuals' responsibility to the state, and whether this may be shaped by contextual features, using the case of opting out of state assessments.

This study guide is intended for use in undergraduate and graduate education classes. The curriculum offers two plans: a one-week plan and a two-week plan, each with suggested guiding questions, activities, and assignments. We assume two class meetings in one week, but you can combine activities in whatever way works best for your class.

Student materials are available to download and print on our website.

### AUDIO

In April 2019 we interviewed Terri Wilson about her work with Michele Moses on parents' refusals of public education, and more specifically, the recent effort in Colorado and nationwide to opt-out of standardized testing. As part of their work, Wilson and Moses have conducted interviews and facilitated dialogue with a range of educational stakeholders, including parents, teachers, principals, and policymakers. Wilson discusses one of the preliminary findings of their work: that context, not ideology, drives decision-making. She also discusses the normative case study she co-authored with Matthew Hastings, included in this study guide.

We created this audio piece to give listeners a compelling companion to the philosophical readings on values and evidence in educational decision-making, the meaning and value of test scores, and test-based accountability, as well as media accounts of the opt-out movement.

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About the Center for Ethics & Education

### LISTEN

<http://ethicsandeducation.wceruw.org/curriculum.html>

# TERRI WILSON

Terri Wilson is an assistant professor at the University of Colorado Boulder in the School of Education, in the Educational Foundations, Policy and Practice (EFPP) area. Her research interests focus on the connections between philosophy of education and education policy; in particular, the relationship between our individual choices (and rights and interests) in education, and how those choices intersect with the 'public goods' of education, including equity, justice and democratic participation. Wilson completed her PhD at Teachers College, Columbia University, and previously worked for the St. Paul Public Schools, and with different community engagement and organizing initiatives in Minnesota.



## SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

- Wilson, T.S., Hastings, M. & Moses, M.S. (2016/2017). Opting out as democratic engagement? The public dimensions and challenges of educational activism. *The Good Society: Journal of Civic Studies*, 25(2-3), 231-255.
- Wilson, T.S. (2016). Contesting the public school: Reconsidering charter schools as counterpublics. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(4), 919-952.
- Wilson, T.S. (2016). Interest, not preference: Dewey and reframing the conceptual vocabulary of school choice. *Educational Theory*, 66(1-2), 147-163.
- Wilson, T.S. (2015). Philosophical tools for understanding the moral complexity of school choice. *Studies in Philosophy of Education*, 34(2), 181-191.
- Moses, M.S. & Wilson, T.S. (2020). "When is it Democratically Legitimate to Opt Out of Public Education?" *Educational Theory*, 70(3), 255-276.
- Wilson, T.S. (2020). "Contesting Public Education: Opting Out, Dissent and Activism," *Educational Theory*, 70(3), 247-254.
- Wilson, T.S. (2019). Refusing the Test: Youth Activism and the Right to Opt Out of State Assessments. In *Philosophy of Education 2018* (pp. 575-587). Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press.

### Related Media

Interviewed for story by Daily Camera, "Boulder Valley School District urges parents to opt kids in, not out, for upcoming state tests," by Amy Bounds. March 18, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.dailycamera.com/2018/03/16/boulder-valley-school-district-urges-parents-to-opt-kids-in-not-out-for-upcoming-state-tests/>

# ONE-WEEK LESSON PLAN

**Topic:** The moral and ethical dimensions of opting out of state assessments

## **Learning Objectives:**

- Students will be able to consider possible aims of education and whether they can be represented by test scores
- Students will be able to interpret the meaning of test scores and assess different arguments concerning the meaning and value of test scores
- Students will be able to understand the effects of high-stakes accountability on the meaning of test scores

## **Readings:**

Brighthouse, H., Ladd, H.F., Loeb, S., & Swift, A. (2018). Educational goods: Values, evidence, and decision-making. London & Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

- Chapter 1: Educational Goods (pp. 19-29)
- The first part of Chapter 3: Achievement as an Educational Good (pp. 44-52)

[Optional for undergraduate classes]: Greene, J.P. & Petrilli, M.J. (2016, May 10). Debate: Are math and reading test scores reliable indicators of school quality? Education Next. Retrieved from <https://www.educationnext.org/debate-are-math-and-reading-test-scores-reliable-indicators-of-school-quality/>

Lane Education Service District (n.d). A parents' guide to standardized achievement testing. Retrieved from <https://www.lesd.k12.or.us/homeschooling/documents/testing-assessment/Parent%27s%20Guide%20to%20Understanding%20Achievement%20Testing.pdf>

Rothstein, R. (2009, Spring). What's wrong with accountability by the numbers? American Educator, 20-32. Retrieved from <https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/ROTHSTEIN%28%29.pdf>

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

USE THESE QUESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION, READING RESPONSE ASSIGNMENTS, OR OTHER ACTIVITIES

- According to Brighthouse et al. (2018), what are “educational goods” and what is their underlying value? Would you change the list by adding different items or subtracting some from the existing list? Why?
- Which of these capacities can be measured by standardized tests? Which can't? Are there any goods that could be diminished due to standardized testing? Why?
- Even if tests can't measure every capacity you would want them to, and may pose risks to other capacities for flourishing, do they still play a valuable role in a state system of education?
- How, if at all, should high-stakes accountability shape the way that we make meaning of test scores?
- How could tests be improved to measure the capacities you think are essential to a flourishing life? Do you agree with Rothstein's (2009) recommendations?
- If the state testing systems proved to be valuable for some populations of students but not others, should parents nevertheless feel obliged to have their children participate

# ONE-WEEK LESSON PLAN (CONT.)

## IN-CLASS ACTIVITY: SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

### Stop & Jot:

Begin class by asking students to reflect individually on their experiences of standardized testing in K-12. Ask them to jot down answers to the following questions on a piece of scrap paper: Why do you think your school engaged in standardized testing? What do you think were the aims of education at that school?

### Informal Polling:

After the stop & jot activity, ask students to identify where they would fall along a continuum between two poles. On a whiteboard/wall, label one side “Test scores are a very good indicator of academic achievement” and label the other side “Test scores are not at all a good indicator of academic achievement.” Ask students to place a post-it with their name on it anywhere along this continuum. As a class, discuss any trends you notice.

### Test Data Activity (see Student Materials Handout):

Place example test data on various tables/spaces in the classroom (see Example Test Data, p. 12). Ask students to circulate the classroom, jotting down answers in the Student Test Data Handout. After students have had a chance to see several examples of test data, open up the discussion to the whole group: What does this data tell you? What doesn't it tell you? What more would you want to know to gain a full understanding of student learning?

### End of Class Reflection:

Ask students to reflect, either individually or as a whole class, on the informal polling activity toward the beginning of class. Ask students whether they would change their position after today's class and why.

## SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment: Week One Audio Response to Terri Wilson (p. 11)

# TWO-WEEK LESSON PLAN

## week one

**Topic:** The moral and ethical dimensions of opting out of state assessments

### **Learning Objectives:**

- Students will be able to consider possible aims of education and whether they can be represented by test scores
- Students will be able to interpret the meaning of test scores and assess different arguments concerning the meaning and value of test scores
- Students will be able to understand the effects of high-stakes accountability on the meaning of test scores

### **Readings:**

Brighouse, H., Ladd, H.F., Loeb, S., & Swift, A. (2018). Educational goods: Values, evidence, and decision-making. London & Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

- Chapter 1: Educational Goods (pp. 19-29)
- The first part of Chapter 3: Achievement as an Educational Good (pp. 44-52)

[Optional for undergraduate classes]: Greene, J.P. & Petrilli, M.J. (2016, May 10). Debate: Are math and reading test scores reliable indicators of school quality? Education Next. Retrieved from <https://www.educationnext.org/debate-are-math-and-reading-test-scores-reliable-indicators-of-school-quality/>

Lane Education Service District (n.d). A parents' guide to standardized achievement testing. Retrieved from <https://www.lesd.k12.or.us/homeschooling/documents/testing-assessment/Parent%27s%20Guide%20to%20Understanding%20Achievement%20Testing.pdf>

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

USE THESE QUESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION, READING RESPONSE ASSIGNMENTS, OR OTHER ACTIVITIES

- According to Brighouse et al. (2018), what are “educational goods” and what is their underlying value? Would you change the list by adding different items or subtracting some from the existing list? Why?
- Which of these capacities can be measured by standardized tests? Which can't? Are there any goods that could be diminished due to standardized testing? Why?
- Even if tests can't measure every capacity you would want them to, and may pose risks to other capacities for flourishing, do they still play a valuable role in a state system of education?
- How, if at all, should high-stakes accountability shape the way that we make meaning of test scores?
- How could tests be improved to measure the capacities you think are essential to a flourishing life? Do you agree with Rothstein's (2009) recommendations?
- If the state testing systems proved to be valuable for some populations of students but not others, should parents nevertheless feel obliged to have their children participate

# TWO-WEEK LESSON PLAN

## week one (cont.)

### SUGGESTED IN-CLASS ASSIGNMENTS

#### Stop & Jot:

Begin class by asking students to reflect individually on their experiences of standardized testing in K-12. Ask them to jot down answers to the following questions on a piece of scrap paper: Why do you think your school engaged in standardized testing? What do you think were the aims of education at that school?

#### Informal Polling:

After the stop & jot activity, ask students to identify where they would fall along a continuum between two poles. On a whiteboard/wall, label one side “Test scores are a very good indicator of academic achievement” and label the other side “Test scores are not at all a good indicator of academic achievement.” Ask students to place a post-it with their name on it anywhere along this continuum. As a class, discuss any trends you notice.

#### Test Data Activity (see Student Materials Handout):

Place example test data on various tables/spaces in the classroom (see Example Test Data). Ask students to circulate the classroom, jotting down answers in the Student Test Data Handout. After students have had a chance to see several examples of test data, open up the discussion to the whole group: What does this data tell you? What doesn't it tell you? What more would you want to know to gain a full understanding of student learning?

#### End of Class Reflection:

Ask students to reflect, either individually or as a whole class, on the informal polling activity toward the beginning of class. Ask students whether they would change their position after today's class and why.

### SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

Assignment: Week One Audio Response to Terri Wilson (p.11)



# TWO-WEEK LESSON PLAN

## week two

**Topic:** The moral and ethical dimensions of opting out of state assessments

**Learning Objectives:**

- Students will be able to consider the individual's responsibilities to the state using the case of opting out of state assessments
- Students will be able to discuss whether and how contextual features shape an individual's obligation to follow state mandates

**Readings:**

**[For students assigned to side A]** Cunha, D. (2017, June 20). My third grader thought she had failed her state standardized test. *Chicago Tribune*. Retrieved from <https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-standardized-testing-reading-math-grades-20170620-story.html>

**[For students assigned to Side B]** Dwyer, L. (2012, March 21). Why I'm not opting my kids out of state testing. *Good*. Retrieved from <https://www.good.is/articles/why-i-m-not-opting-my-kids-out-of-state-testing>

Wilson, T.S. & Hastings, M. (N.D.) Refusing the test: Debating assessment and accountability in public education. *Justice in Schools*. Retrieved from [https://www.justiceinschools.org/files/play-pen/files/opting\\_out\\_full\\_length\\_case\\_-\\_formatted.pdf](https://www.justiceinschools.org/files/play-pen/files/opting_out_full_length_case_-_formatted.pdf)

Moses, M.S. & Wilson, T.S. (2020). "When is it Democratically Legitimate to Opt Out of Public Education?" *Educational Theory*, 70(3), 255-276.

**Suggested Activity:** Structured Academic Controversy (p. 9-10)

**Suggested Assignment:** Week Two Audio Response (p. 11)

### GUIDING QUESTIONS

USE THESE QUESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION, READING RESPONSE ASSIGNMENTS, OR OTHER ACTIVITIES

- What does it mean to "opt out" of standardized testing? Who wants to opt out and why?
- Who benefits and who loses from students and parents opting out of standardized testing?
- In the audio piece you listened to for class today, Terri Wilson explains that most media accounts of the opt-out movement understand the movement as ideologically driven. However, Wilson makes the case that the movement is often driven by contextual features rather than ideology when analyzed on-the-ground. Are there contexts in which the state should allow families to opt-out of standardized testing? If so, what are these cases?
- Should the state require that all students take standardized tests? What are the most convincing arguments in favor of state-mandated testing? What are the most convincing arguments against state-mandated testing?
- Most vaccinations don't benefit the people who get them; they mostly benefit other people. Should parents feel obliged to have their children vaccinated?



# TWO-WEEK LESSON PLAN

## week two (cont.)

### In-Class Activity: Structured Academic Controversy [Before Class]

**Description:** In this activity, students engage with two sides of the debate about opting out of state testing. Based on readings that they do before class, they will develop arguments in groups of 3 or 4 students and then discuss their position with the other side.

A helpful resource about SAC can be found here:

<https://serc.carleton.edu/sp/library/sac/how.html>

**Objective:** By the end of this activity, students will be able to articulate a considered position on whether parents are morally permitted to opt their children out of state testing in light of evidence, values, and opposing perspectives.

#### **Before Class:**

Break students up into groups of 3 or 4. Assign each group to either Side A or Side B so that there are the same number of Side A groups and Side B groups.

**Side A:** Yes, you should opt your child out of state testing.

Before class, Side A students should read “My Third-Grader Thought She Had Failed Her State Standardized Exam” by Darlena Cunha

(<https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-standardized-testing-reading-math-grades-20170620-story.html>)

**Side B:** No, you should not opt your child out of state testing.

Before class, Side B students should read “Why I’m Not Opting My Kids Out of State Testing” by Liz Dwyer (<https://www.good.is/articles/why-i-m-not-opting-my-kids-out-of-state-testing>)

# TWO-WEEK LESSON PLAN

## week two (cont.)

### **In-Class Activity: Structured Academic Controversy [During Class]**

Students will work to answer the questions: Are parents doing something wrong if they opt their child out of state testing? And, are parents morally required to make their students take state tests?

1. Give students 15 minutes to look back at Wilson and Hasting's normative case and other previous course readings, and research online in their groups, as they see fit. In these 15 minutes, students should aim to develop a cohesive argument for their side. (Use the reasons on the Student Materials Handout)

2. After 15 minutes, match up Side A groups with Side B groups. In these groups they should follow this format for discussing their positions:

- Side A describes their argument. During this time, Side B can't talk. (5 minutes)
- Side B re-states Side A's argument. During this time, Side A can't talk. (3 minutes)
- Side B describes their argument. During this time, Side A can't talk. (5 minutes)
- Side A re-states Side B's argument. During this time, Side B can't talk. (3 minutes)

3. Once the students have finished their discussion, give them 3-5 minutes to independently answer the questions: Are parents doing something wrong if they opt their child out of state testing? And, are parents morally required to make their students take state tests?

# ASSIGNMENT: Audio Responses

## **Week 1: Audio Response to Terri Wilson**

Students will create a two-minute audio response to an excerpt from the Terri Wilson audio piece and upload to the online platform of your choice. Students should begin with a brief summary of Wilson's main argument and focus on a couple of ideas they would like to develop further. Students might choose to argue for or against parents' right to opt-out, delve more deeply into a particular issue (e.g., parents' rights, obligations to the system), or raise key tensions or questions that this quote raises. Their audio response should feel conversational, as if they in the room with Terri Wilson, rather than sound like an academic paper.

## **Week 2: Audio Response to Partner**

In Week 2, assign students a partner. Students will listen to their partner's audio piece, create a two-minute audio response, and upload to the online platform of your choice. Students should begin with a brief summary of their partner's main argument and then delve more deeply into one or two key points their partner made. Students may choose to a) agree with their partner and offer ways they might expand on their argument or b) disagree with their partner and offer reasons based in values and evidence.

*Note:* Students do not need elaborate recording equipment in order to produce a quality audio response. Most smartphones are suitable for an assignment like this one, and many libraries have audio recorders available for check-out. If you think many of your students will not have access to a device that they record on, you can have them write a short audio script instead. Two minutes of speaking translates to roughly 250 written words, so you may have them write a response of that length.

# DESCRIPTIONS OF TEST DATA

## **Wisconsin Forward**

States administer different tests to track student achievement. The Wisconsin Forward is one such exam. Rolled out in the 2015-16 academic year, the exam is “designed to gauge how well students are doing in relation to the Wisconsin Academic Standards.” In this study guide, we include school-level data from the Madison Metropolitan School District, the second largest school district in the state of Wisconsin.

## **NAEP**

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is the “largest national representative and continuing assessment of what America’s students know and can do in various subject areas.” While states administer their own assessments of individual student data, NAEP is the only uniform assessment administered in every state, providing the only common measure across states. Not every student takes this test—NAEP is administered to a representative sample of students across the country. For this study guide, we included NAEP 2019 Highlights in both Reading and Math.

## **Los Angeles Times Teacher Ratings**

During the 2004-05 and 2009-10 academic years, the LA Times published “value-added” ratings of teachers. This rating was based on student performance on the California Standards Tests for English and Math. Value-added is a “statistical approach that estimates a teacher’s effectiveness at raising student performance on standardized tests. In essence, it projects a child’s future performance by using past scores—in this case, on Math and English tests.” This study guide includes teacher ratings from a school categorized as a “most effective school”—Ninety-Second Street Elementary—as well as ratings from a school categorized as a “least effective school”—Valley Alternative Magnet.

# THE CENTER FOR ETHICS & EDUCATION

We at the Center are committed to encouraging philosophical reflection on contemporary issues in education. This curriculum was developed for use in undergraduate and graduate education, philosophy, and sociology classes. It is available for free.

The Center for Ethics & Education is housed in the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER) in the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The Center supports the field of philosophy of education by supporting scholars, graduate students, practitioners, and policymakers in thinking analytically about ethical issues in education.

How did it go using this teaching guide with your class?  
We'd love to hear from you!

Website: <http://ethicsandeducation.wceruw.org>

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