



Komal Bhasin, left, the principal of UP Academy Leonard Middle School in Lawrence, Mass., rallies with teachers before students arrive.

Stormy Assessment Season

Some Balk As Testing Rolls Ahead

'Opt-Out' Activists Set Sights On Hobbled States' Exams

By Andrew Ujifusa

The push by activists of various stripes to have parents opt students out of state exams this spring has transformed skepticism and long-running anger over the direction of education policy into a movement with numbers and a growing public profile. Whether those activists can craft a durable and effective political movement remains an open question.

Advocates, standardized-testing opponents, and observers continue to debate the movement's true goals, the disparity between the proportion of opt-outs and their broader importance, and how much the demographics of participating parents hurt or strengthen the cause.

Recent events in New York state, where disputes over the fiscal 2016 budget ratcheted up tensions over the role of testing in state policy, show how the opt-out campaign can gain traction. After years of negotiations and disagreements with the state over evaluations, the 600,000-member New York State United Teachers called on parents to opt their children out of exams aligned with the Common Core State Standards, and tens of thousands reportedly have done so.

And in a sharp counterpoint to social-media monitoring conducted on behalf of the testing company Pearson to watch for

PAGE 16 >

State Takeover Gives Mass. District a Fresh Start

By Denisa R. Superville

Lawrence, Mass.

Principal Colleen M. Lennon proudly watched over some of her young charges at the Emily G. Wetherbee School on a recent afternoon in this struggling city of 77,000, seeing students engage in activities that are a given in most middle- to upper-income communities.

They were taking drumming lessons. Fingerknitting. Practicing cheerleading stunts. Illustrating a short story. And

making fruit salad in a class on healthy eating.

Just four years earlier, such enrichment activities were not the norm in Lawrence's schools, said Ms. Lennon, a veteran school leader. Then the state of Massachusetts stepped in.

In 2011—following years of poor academic performance and weak leadership—state education officials took what was an unprecedented step in Massachusetts of seizing control of the 14,000-student district.

The plan was simple: to provide rigorous academics and a holistic education

experience. Less than five years later, positive shoots are sprouting. The percentage of Lawrence students scoring proficient on state math assessments increased from 28 percent in 2011 to 41 percent last year, and those proficient in English/language arts moved from 41 percent to 44 percent. The number of Level 1 schools—those that meet state performance targets and are not among the state's bottom 20 percent—has risen from two in 2011 to six in 2014. And in schools that are labeled as Level 3 or Level 4—still a majority of the district's 33 schools—students

PAGE 18 >

Science Standards Pop Up in Districts

By Liana Heitin

While statewide adoptions of the Next Generation Science Standards continue to prove slow and steady, some districts are jumping the gun on their states and starting to bring the new standards to classrooms as soon as possible.

In many cases, science teachers themselves have led this charge.

"I think what you're seeing really is grassroots support among science teachers everywhere regardless of what's happening at their state level," said David L. Evans, the executive director of the Arlington, Va.-based National Science Teachers Association, which provided guidance during the standards' development.

So far, just 13 states and the District of

PAGE 21 >

Undocumented Students Strive to Adapt

Some Schools Help Youths Get Foothold in Language, Culture

By Corey Mitchell

Washington

Kevin faced a traumatic journey to the United States in search of a better life.

The 19-year-old undocumented immigrant from El Salvador faced yet another set of challenges when he arrived in the United States last year and enrolled in school.

First came the laughs of classmates poking fun at his halting English. Then came the puzzled looks from teachers struggling to understand those same words.

But a new place in the same place has made all the difference for Kevin.

The teenager is one of 200 students enrolled in the first-year International Academy for English-language learners at the District of



Students in the District of Columbia's International Academy at Cardozo Education Campus, immigrants from Central America and Asia, work on an assignment in history class.

Columbia's Cardozo Education Campus, a school-within-a-school for students who arrived in the United States within the past 18 months.

The struggles and successes of Cardozo's

PAGE 14 >

Nevada Exams Hit Tech Trouble

By Michele Molnar & Andrew Ujifusa

When breakdowns disrupted Nevada's online testing last month, state officials were left searching for answers—and they blamed a vendor charged with administering the test, as well as the consortium of states that designed the common-core-aligned exams.

But the testing provider accused of botching the assessments, Measured Progress, has said the responsibility lies at least partly with another vendor, the American Institutes for Research, which it claims was late in delivering critical software needed to make sure the exams could be administered smoothly.

The dust-up is the latest of the battles that have erupted in a number of states, including California and New Mexico, over common-core testing contracts.

PAGE 16 >