Charlotte parents speak out against high-stakes tests

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CHARLOTTE COUNTY — Some local parents are taking a stand against the Florida Standards Assessments.

The FSA, made up of state standardized testing in language arts and math, was developed and created by a private company.

Jill MacIsaac, a stay-at-home mom in Port Charlotte, is one of the local parents who has spoken out publicly against the test. MacIsaac told Charlotte County School Board members at a recent meeting she is against the FSA. She isn’t against teachers testing students, but she believes a test created by non-educators is an inappropriate measure of students’ academic performance.

“We have to take our schools back from big business,” MacIsaac said. “The schools have to be given back to the educators, the teachers have to have some leeway to teach what they need to teach in the manner that’s most appropriate for the students.”

Maclsaac is one of more than 100 parents in a closed Opt Out Charlotte Facebook group, which describes itself as an organization to inform parents of their rights regarding high-stakes testing. “Opt Out Charlotte rejects high stakes testing as meaningless and detrimental to the development of a creative, nurturing and supportive learning environment,” the site states.

The FSA is often referred to as high-stakes testing because it is used to make decisions about student’s promotion to fourth grade, high school graduation, teacher evaluation, and school recognition funds.

MacIsaac said that these high stakes lead to teachers “teaching to the test,” instead of teaching students a joy of learning. Still, Florida Department of Education Spokeswoman Cheryl Etters told the Sun in an email that “Florida law requires all students in public schools to participate in the state assessment program (Section 1008.22, Florida Statutes).”

Even so, parents in Opt Out Charlotte like MacIsaac said they are encouraging their children to only do so, minimally.

MacIsaac said she encouraged her son as a third-grader at Kingsway Elementary to sit for the FSA and sign his name, but not answer any questions.

“The law states that all children must participate in statewide testing, and we did that,” MacIsaac said. “We participated to the extent that the law requires … it doesn’t state that a child must answer a single question. We put our name on the booklet, and said thank you very much, I’m done.”

Another Opt Out Charlotte parent, Amy Cabral, said her daughter in 10th grade at Lemon Bay High School also participated minimally in standardized testing, and received an “NR2” code.

Etters stated that “NR2 is the code used when the student responses do not meet attemptedness criteria … Florida law requires all students to participate in the state assessment program and this is not the number of students ‘opting out.’”
Cabral said her daughter has been threatened with losing an elective and remedial classes since she received an NR2 on the FSA. LBHS Principal Bob Bedford said “on the side of caution” without any scores on the FSA, ACT or SAT, the school requires students to take a reading class.

“While this does require a student to give up an elective, if the student takes either the ACT or SAT and shows that remediation is not needed, we would not require the reading class to be taken,” he said. “The last thing we want to happen is for a student not to be able to graduate because we assumed that they were on track to graduate without any data to support it.”

Florida statute dictates a third-grader must score a Level 2 or higher on the English Language Arts assessment to be promoted to fourth grade unless the district exempts the student for good cause. Similarly, under state law, passage of the ELA and Algebra 1 End of Course assessment in 10th grade may be a prerequisite for high school graduation.

“What’s happening in third grade and throughout the state is we’re devaluing our teachers in third grade by saying it really doesn’t matter what you think, it doesn’t really matter what you say if they fail this test,” MacIsaac said.

President Bryan Bouton of the Charlotte Florida Education Association agrees that these tests are devaluing teachers.

“We are being pushed aside in favor of here’s a computer program, all you need to do is monitor them in front of it,” he said. “It’s glorified babysitting as we prep them for a test. We’re teaching kids to fill in bubbles, and we’re not teaching them anything about reality and about life.”

Still, parents in the Opt Out Charlotte movement said their decision to stand up for teachers didn’t come without backlash.

MacIsaac said it was particularly worrisome to ask her third-grade child to not answer ELA questions due to this statute, but she believes that it is being misinterpreted to apply to students who have no documented reading deficiency in their class. After recently meeting with a retention committee, she said she feels confident her son will be promoted to fourth grade.

“That’s always the possibility, that they would dig their heels in, and carry on with their misinterpretation of the statute, and say because he doesn’t have a score he has to be retained, but I was confident that his grade in his classroom was not failing, so I was confident that I would be victorious in that battle,” MacIsaac said.

The FSA has stirred up controversy since the American Institutes for Research, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit, won a $220 million, six-year contract in 2014 to develop and administer it. The test was also field tested in Utah, which lead to criticism about its relevance to Florida students.

Charlotte County School Board members released a position statement in November 2014 showing opposition to these state assessments being used to retain students and judge schools. “We believe that the purpose of assessment is to diagnose and to improve teaching and learning,” their statement reads. “Any use beyond that (e.g., student retention, grading of schools) leads to misuse and misinterpretation of data, wrong conclusions, and possible harm to students, teachers, schools, and communities.”

Still, board members said the district would not opt out of this testing since their hands were tied to it under state law.