The Long Island Opt-Out Movement and local politics in four school districts

Raymond James Webb
University at Albany, State University of New York, raywebb13@gmail.com

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The Long Island Opt-Out Movement and Local Politics in Four School Districts

by Raymond James Webb

A Dissertation
Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Education
Department of Educational Policy & Leadership

Spring 2022
Abstract

This study focused on the political influence of the Long Island Opt-Out Organization, an interest group that promoted the right of parents and guardians to have their children opt out of standardized testing. The study examined the activism and influence of this group on school board elections and policy agendas in four school districts in Long Island, New York during 2014-2019.

Research findings for the four cases were derived from collection and analysis of data on opt-out rates for standardized testing, school board races, election results, and information from in-depth interviews with school district administrators and school board members. The Long Island Opt-Out Organization and local teachers unions worked to defeat or elect school board candidates according to whether a candidate’s policy priorities were aligned with theirs. Candidates endorsed by the Long Island Opt-Out Organization and/or the local teachers unions were more likely to defeat incumbents, be re-elected, or secure an open seat than candidates without such an endorsement. In some districts, other issue-specific advocacy groups were active and then faded while the Long Island Opt-Out Organization and teachers unions were active in school board races throughout 2014-2019.

Prominent issues in school board campaigns were student opt-out of standardized testing, fiscal responsibility, school security, and school district transparency with the community. The study identified differences between campaign rhetoric and school board policy agendas. Some board candidates had ambitious plans for school board policy. However, once elected, state and federal education laws and rules placed constraints on the types of policies and practices school board members could adopt. School board races in 2014-2019 did not lead to significant changes in school board policy agendas on the issue of opt-out in the four districts. Whole Child Theory, a curricular approach favored by the Long Island Opt-Out Organization, was not a leading campaign issue across the four districts from 2014-2019. However, by 2020, all four districts
had adopted some elements of the Whole Child Theory approach such as movement education and play-based learning.

In early 2020, state standardized testing was paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Whole Child Theory proposals like movement education and play-based learning could not be enacted, due to virus concerns. Interviewees cited COVID-19 and Critical Race Theory as reasons for increased political activism at school board meetings. New interest groups sought to influence school boards in ways similar to efforts of the Long Island Opt-Out Organization, including endorsement of school board candidates, use of social media efforts, and coalition building.

Interviewees reported ethical dilemmas pertaining to political activities by teachers and Parent-Teacher Associations. School board roles and jurisdictions should be clearly defined and communicated to the public. This study contributes to research findings that school districts are sites of dynamic and significant political activism. Greater transparency and engagement of parents in open forums may ease political tensions and improve school board policy processes.
Acknowledgements

To my parents, Raymond and Maryann, for instilling in me the values of hard work, grit, determination, and a fierce love for education. Your infinite wisdom, sense of humor, and love I hold dear. Thank you.

To Danielle, my advisor, my fellow explorer, my best friend, my love. Thank you for your encouragement, intellect, strength, patience, and resolve. This academic and life accomplishment could not have been possible for me without you by my side (and yes, your incredibly kind and supporting family and cats too!). Thank you.

To my sisters, Lauren, Eileen, Kerri, and their families, for your patience, humor, friendship, love, supply of many adventures and happy life moments as I was on this academic journey. Thank you.

To my grandparents, Arthur & Mary, Raymond & Ann, whose foundations of love, guidance, support, and encouragement have gotten me to this achievement. Thank you.

I would like to express my deepest and most sincere gratitude to Dr. Sandra Vergari, my committee chair and professor, for her steadfast encouragement, belief, and intellect that helped me accomplish this study. Additionally, thank you to Dr. Heinz-Dieter Meyer and Dr. Kathie Spring for your support, advisement, and service on my dissertation committee. Thank you.

Lastly, for my golden girls, Bailey, Reagan, & Riley. I love you always.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the public-school administrators, school board members, teachers, parents, and students who live and work each day to better public education in the United States. To the educators and school district leaders who contributed to this study, thank you for allowing me to bring your story to life.
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List of Abbreviations

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AYP</td>
<td>Adequate Yearly Progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELA</td>
<td>English Language Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESSA</td>
<td>Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESSEA</td>
<td>Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IASA</td>
<td>Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIOO</td>
<td>Long Island Opt-Out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCLB</td>
<td>No Child Left Behind Act of 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEGP</td>
<td>National Education Goals Panel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NESIC</td>
<td>National Education Standards and Improvement Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYS</td>
<td>New York State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYSAPE</td>
<td>New York State Allies for Public Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYSED</td>
<td>New York State Education Department</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYSSBA</td>
<td>New York State School Boards Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYSUT</td>
<td>New York State United Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PISA</td>
<td>Programme for International Student Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTT</td>
<td>Race to the Top</td>
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</table>
Chapter 1: Introduction

Accountability is a word often used in the United States educational policy arena. It is a word used when referring to federal and state government, school districts, individual schools, teachers, parents, and students. Recent federal and state policy initiatives have sought to increase standards and hold schools accountable to create a more vibrant educational system.

In 2011, New York State aimed to hold their schools, teachers, and students accountable, when it joined the Common Core State Standards Initiative. Under this initiative, New York’s students in grades 3-8 would take two examinations aligned with Common Core standards: one in mathematics and another in English-Language Arts. Policymakers wanted to increase the education standards throughout the state, and to properly assess school district and teacher performance in these two critical subjects of education. However, in the spring of 2014, school districts throughout New York State began to administer the state issued tests, only to find cases of significant backlash from teachers, teachers unions, parents, and students.

Research Problem

As New York State opted into the Common Core State Standards Initiative in 2011 and began administering state tests in 2014, parents began to opt-out their children from taking their exams for differing reasons. These reasons may include the emotional strains on students and showing solidarity with teachers as families in regions of New York State made opt-out decisions for their student. In particular, Long Island, which Newsday called New York’s opt-out “stronghold” showed increased and steady strength in support of the opt-out decision and action early on (Hildebrand, 2018). What began as individual calls for parental choice in their child’s
education, transformed into a large grassroots political and advocacy organization that is today called the Long Island Opt-Out Organization.

This dissertation takes a look at the political, electoral, and agenda-setting strength of the Long Island Opt-Out Organization as it continues its momentum throughout the Long Island region. Its continued influence in local school district politics brings up a need for careful research and inquiries into its ongoing strength in communities where the movement is most strong. The organization, since its inception in 2014, has endorsed hundreds of candidates for local school boards of education, with the hope of electing policy leaders to these boards who support the movement’s causes, especially the opt-out decision and support for the Whole Child Theory. Most critical in this inquiry is the movement’s effect on school district agenda setting and how the replacement of school board members with Opt-Out Movement friendly candidates has led to instructional and administrative changes in school districts.

Understanding the Setting

Long Island, New York is divided into four counties: Kings (Brooklyn), Queens, Nassau, and Suffolk. Queens and Brooklyn are two of five boroughs of New York City, which educationally, are under the New York City Department of Education’s jurisdiction. However, most locals deem the term “Long Island” as only encompassing Nassau and Suffolk Counties. (LI.com). Within both Nassau and Suffolk are communities where 125 public school districts serve the region’s students (Harris, 2015).

In Table 1.1, Nassau and Suffolk Counties are detailed along demographic lines to compare both counties to one another. Data for all of New York state is also presented for comparison to the Long Island region.
Table 1.1: Comparing Long Island to NYS Demographically

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th># Of Public-School Districts</th>
<th>Average Income per Household</th>
<th>Racial Makeup</th>
<th>Educational Attainment of Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nassau County</td>
<td>1,356,924</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>$116,100</td>
<td>58.5% White</td>
<td>46% have a bachelor’s degree or higher (age 25+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>17.5% Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>91.4% are high school graduates (age 25+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>13.1% Black or African American</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10.9% Asian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffolk County</td>
<td>1,476,601</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>$101,031</td>
<td>66.6% White</td>
<td>36.3% have a bachelor’s degree or higher (age 25+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>20.2% Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>90.6% are high school graduates (age 25+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8.8% Black or African American</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.2% Asian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York State</td>
<td>19,453,561</td>
<td>732</td>
<td>$68,486</td>
<td>55.3% White</td>
<td>36.6% have a bachelor’s degree or higher (age 25+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>19.3% Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>86.8% are high school graduates (age 25+)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>17.6% Black or African American</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9.0% Asian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Census.gov, U.S. Census Bureau, 2019 estimates; NYSED, 2019

Table 1.1 allows us to understand Long Island demographically at a deeper level. One can see several important data points to understand more about Long Island as a region. In terms
of educational attainment of residents over 25 years old, both Nassau and Suffolk counties are comprised of a more educated population than the rest of the state. Both counties also have a higher percentage of White residents than the state, though Suffolk has a higher percentage of Hispanic/Latino residents than both. Suffolk has nearly double the average household income than that of the state, with Nassau’s average only slightly below Suffolk but comfortably higher than the state.

The research questions and analysis undertaken in this dissertation occur through a political science lens. The intention of providing these data estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau is only to provide context into the demographic makeup of Long Island as a region. As Chapter 2 of this dissertation will detail in further depth, there are many sociological assumptions that can be made to understand why the opt-out decision is so strong throughout both Nassau and Suffolk counties. These factors may explain political and electoral strength in more demographically homogenous communities throughout the region.

**Long Island Opt-Out and its Global Parallels**

The Long Island Opt-Out Movement is an example of a large grassroots community movement that is concerned with the increasing reliance on the use of standardized testing to measure student achievement and growth, as well as school efficiency. Similar concerns have also come to fruition throughout the world. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has been met with concerns by scholars who worry about the consequences of the program. In a letter to Dr. Andreas Schleicher from the OECD in Paris, Heinz-Dieter Meyer and Katie Zahedi (2014) convey several significant concerns of the PISA program that correspond to the significant concerns of the actors within the Long Island Opt-Out
Movement when looking at the effects of Common Core. Chapter 2 of this dissertation will illuminate the concerns of the actors within the Long Island Opt-Out Movement. However, as the Meyer & Zahedi (2014) letter conveys regarding PISA, there are mutual concerns shared among these scholars and actors on both PISA and Common Core that include:

1. The increased reliance on quantitative measures of assessment through the implementation and enforcement of standardized testing (p. 32).

2. The use of a ranking/grading system to evaluate students, teachers, and school administrators (p. 32).

3. The emphasis on a “narrow range” of more measurable aspects of education like math and science, which has reduced emphasis on educational objectives such as physical, civic, moral, and artistic development of students (p. 32).

4. Less autonomy of teachers within the classroom to teach to the uniqueness of their students as ways of assessment lead to scripted lesson plans and multiple-choice testing (p. 32).

The concerns presented by Meyer & Zahedi (2014) were met with a reaction by Dr. Schleicher (2014) from the OECD that serves as a response in support of PISA and its measures. To summarize, PISA is seen by proponents as a way to strategically think about educational policy design that does not infringe on the well-being of students taking assessments (Schleicher, 2014, pp. 33-34). It assesses social and emotional dimensions, equity issues, and parental support, among others (p. 34). Dr. Schleicher cites that PISA allows for particular attention to empirical details concerning social inequalities in student populations as well as allowing countries to work across their borders on educational policy (pp. 33-34).
Nevertheless, the relationship between the concerns around PISA and that of 3-8 state assessments in New York State are significant in that they draw upon similar conclusions; that standardized tests are not the right answers to individual student development and school district efficiency and success. While proponents find that standardized tests allow schools to use data to find areas in need of improvement, critics like Long Island Opt-Out advocates believe there is more to it. This dissertation will strive to bring to light these concerns and how these concerns have mobilized community members to run for school board and try to change local policy agenda’s away from the indirect and direct influences of policies like PISA and Common Core.

**Long Island’s Opt-Out Movement**

The Long Island Opt-Out Movement was started in 2014, in reaction to New York State exams administered in the spring to grades 3 through 8. Concerned parents who saw their children attempt to manage the expectations of test preparation came together to oppose the testing mandates, citing the negative impact on the socio-emotional development of their children, among other reasons. What initially started as a movement to oppose the content of the exams and the emotional impact on both students and teachers, turned into a strong political and electoral operation in local school district elections. Over the last seven consecutive elections across the region, the Long Island Opt-Out Movement endorsed candidates who support opt-out and the Whole Child Theory platform. Chapter 2 of this dissertation will detail that platform. It will also explain how the movement got started, who were and are the actors within, and how its strength continues to the present day in certain school district communities.

**Research Questions**

The research questions are intended to increase our understanding of the electoral and agenda setting ramifications of the potential success of the Long Island Opt-Out Movement in
four school districts. These questions were developed partly from analyzing other research examinations of the Long Island Opt-Out Movement. This dissertation will expand on elements of sociology and history that have been dissected by other scholars. Topics like parents making the opt-out decision and how the opt-out decision came into effect have been researched and assessed. The research will consist of in-depth studies of four Long Island school districts. The following research questions add on to those analyses, paying particular attention to political science. Using the work of John Kingdon, whose contributions of the three streams help format the discussion of chapter 2, the four research questions that will guide this dissertation are as follows:

1. What were the most publicly discussed issues in each school board race?
   a. Within the course of the campaign, when and how did opt-out receive attention?
   b. Within the course of the campaign, when and how did Whole Child Theory receive attention?

2. Were there any policy entrepreneurs in the four districts focused on opt-out and Whole Child Theory during 2014-2019? If so, when and where? What were their positions and activities? How do they fit the definition of a policy entrepreneur?

3. Among the school board candidates, what were their declared positions on opt-out and Whole Child Theory? What were the 2014-2019 election results for each category (a b c below)?
   a. Incumbents
   b. Challengers
   c. Open Seat Candidates
4. Across the four districts, is there any evidence that school board incumbent electoral
defeats were “focusing events” as defined by Kingdon (2011)? Was this the case for any
open seat races?
   a. In each case, were there any major changes in board policy agendas pertaining to
      opt-out and Whole Child Theory as a result of the focusing event?
   b. Were any major policy changes pertaining to opt-out and Whole Child Theory
      adopted?

Research Criteria & Methodology

Following review of the historical context of the movement in chapter 2, chapter 3 of this
dissertation presents the methodological approach as I entered the field and engaged with
participants. In order to do this and find out more about the political, electoral, and agenda
setting impact of the Long Island Opt-Out Movement in school districts, I conducted in-depth
interviews. The interview questions were aligned with each of the research questions.
Interviewees are active political and policy actors in the four school districts that met criteria laid
out in chapter 3. I selected four Long Island school districts that are similar in nature.

Once four school districts were selected, I used the work of Robert K. Yin (2018) to
guide my methodological approach. Yin’s guidance for case study research helped me explore
the Long Island Opt-Out Movement systematically and in-depth. This case study illuminates
decisions, why decisions were made, how decisions were implemented, and the results (Yin,
2018).
Results

A total of twelve interviews were conducted with school district administrators, school board members, and community members. The twelve interviewees represented four public school districts on Long Island. Four research questions guided interview questions and discussions that culminated in analysis, new understandings, and unanticipated findings.

Conclusion

This study examines a significant, current phenomenon in education politics and policy. The research findings should be of interest to a broad audience of education scholars, policy makers, and interest groups. After conducting this study, recommendations for education leaders and recommendations for future research are discussed.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

The purpose of this study is to examine school board elections as windows of opportunity for the Opt-Out Movement agenda throughout Long Island. Educational institutions, political actors and changing educational reform policy have contributed to the emergence of the Opt-Out Movement on Long Island.

This literature review will detail school district governance structures in New York State, the context of the Long Island Opt-Out Movement and the decision to opt-out itself by parents and/or guardians. Historical context will also be presented to grant insight into the emergence and evolution of this local grassroots movement. Lastly, I discuss how Social Movement Theory, Political Spectacle Theory, and the multiple streams framework correspond with and help explain this K-12 educational phenomenon.

Recent Global Context: The Role of OECD’s PISA

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is “the main engine in the global accountability juggernaut, which measures, classifies, and ranks students, educators, and school systems from diverse cultures and countries using the same standardized benchmarks” (Meyer & Benavot, 2013, pp. 9-10). It is a study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) which measures a student’s scholastic performance in subjects such as mathematics, science, and reading. OECD through PISA focuses its effort on looking at countries and school systems within to analyze data to “find ways to improve school performance” through test scores (Meyer & Benavot, 2013, p. 10).

Proponents of PISA argue that it allows for policymakers and educational leaders to identify what schools are high-achieving and what schools are lower-achieving. It also allows for
a deeper understanding of what high performing schools are doing so low-performing schools can strive to match (Meyer & Benavot, 2013, p. 10). On the contrary, critics question the “possibility of culturally neutral educational platforms” when the same tests are administered in countries whose social, economic, cultural, and colonial backgrounds are different (p. 10).

**Critique of PISA and its relationship with the growth of Long Island Opt-Out**

Meyer and Benavot (2013) scrutinize the role of PISA as they question the “presumption that the quality of a nation’s school system can be evaluated through an assessment exercise claiming to be a politically and ideologically neutral undertaking” (p. 11). They argue that schools face external pressures of accountability and efficiency. As a result, they must adjust to market pressures by altering their curricula to be more competitive. In order to do this, schools administer regular assessments in order to calculate their overall efficiency and market that to the greater community.

Because education is increasingly becoming part of a larger economic agenda, Meyer and Benavot (2013) state that at a loss therefore is the practice of and for democratic participation and civic engagement. Because school systems are focusing on market principles to remain competitive, they are no longer undertaking the civic role they traditionally had prioritized for students (pp. 12-13). As Sellar and Lingard (2013) similarly cite in their work, the capacities for human capital growth, which will be discussed later in this chapter as well, is at a loss because of PISA. Today’s student is not developing the competencies for social citizenship, as they are instead focusing on economic capitalization of oneself to enhance skills and credentials for future employment (p. 195). The “whole child” is not being developed in this case, which will later be discussed in this chapter as a leading theory of the Long Island Opt-Out Movement.
The contributions of Meyer and Benavot (2013) provide a more global perspective as this chapter seeks to provide a greater understanding of how the Long Island Opt-Out Movement came to fruition and has carried itself out over the last several years. While this research focuses on a microcosm of the anti-testing movement, the work of both Meyer and Benavot (2013) and Sellar and Lingard (2013) provide the greater story of how the accountability and efficiency movement in education more globally has impacted nations, like the United States, and its local communities.

**Historical Context: Accountability & Standards from the Federal Government**

*Education in America from 1983-2009*

Perhaps the best place to start discussion on the emergence of accountability measures in K-12 education is with presidential administrations over the last thirty years. The 1980’s, often known as the “testing decade” (Madaus, et. al, 2009, p. 18), saw U.S. President Ronald Reagan call for an inquiry into U.S. education as a result of the United States’ students being outperformed by students of other nations (Jones, 2009). The publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 found that students were not meeting expectations achieving college graduation, there were steady declines in science achievement, poor teaching in classrooms, classroom time being poorly managed, and that there was a need to attract better teachers (Jones, 2009, p. 3).

George H.W. Bush in 1991, advocated for his “America 2000” initiative as a national strategy, which included several goals to raise the nation’s educational standards and proficiency (Finn, 2002; Manno, 1995). America 2000 required raising standards for all students with tests implemented to meet those standards. It called for a reduction in federal government “red tape,” encouraged school choice, and urged administrative control of schools to be shifted from professionals and teacher unions to parents and civilians (Manno, 1995). Several years later, Bill
Clinton, Bush’s successor, signed into law the *Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994* (IASA). IASA reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) that aimed at improving education for disadvantaged children in poor areas (Jorgenson & Hoffmann, 2003, p. 3).

President Clinton also signed into law, *The Goals 2000: Educate America Act*. To briefly summarize, the law is based on the idea of what is called “outcomes-based education,” where goals are set to achieve a certain outcome, and a student and their teacher strive to produce that outcome (Stedman, 1993). *Goals 2000* sought to create education goals, standards, and assessments, create state and local education reform, and improve upon work force standards, all through the creation of different national commissions like the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP) and the National Education Standards and Improvement Council (NESIC) (Stedman, 1993).

In 2001, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act and, in 2002, President George W. Bush signed “NCLB” which was a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965. NCLB reauthorized ESEA in several ways. When discussing NCLB, Thomas Dee and Brian Jacob (2010) wrote that one of the hallmark features of the legislation was its call for states to conduct annual student assessments in the form of written examinations that would be associated with individual state standards. Another was to identify and label schools as failing to make “adequate yearly progress” (AYP), and to place sanctions and grant rewards to schools based on their AYP status. These features of NCLB, highlighted by Dee and Jacob, were to publicize information on the results of school assessments taken by students to the public to show the productivity, or lack thereof, of the public school (p. 149).
NCLB provided instruction benchmarks and expectations of schools and teachers, with particular emphasis on math and ELA instruction, as well as comprehensive examinations. Schools and school districts were therefore held accountable for the results on the assessments and were given public grades on their success (Hess & McShane, 2018, p. 13).

**Administration of U.S. President Barack Obama, 2009-2017**

Barack Obama became President in January 2009, succeeding George W. Bush and paving the way for new educational initiatives and policies introduced at the federal level. During Obama’s first year in office, “the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers coordinated the Common Core State Standards Initiative among the states” (Vergari, 2009). The governor and chief state school officer of every state but two, Alaska and Texas, agreed to participate in these learning standards that emphasize English language arts and literacy (ELA) and mathematics for grades K-12. The goal of the Common Core program, per advocates of the standards, is to reverse “lagging education indicators in the United States” which set back the United States from “global economic and educational competition” (Vergari, 2009). The standards were intended to promote unity amongst all fifty states, instead of each state’s education system being on different levels of achievement and academic rigor (Coburn, et. al., 2016, p. 243).

Common Core is a state-by-state adopted policy supported by the federal government of the United States. Yet, the Obama Administration in 2010 executed the “$4.35 billion Race to the Top program, the largest competitive education grant program in United States history. The program was initially authorized by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009” (Vergari, 2009). The Race to the Top program, commonly abbreviated as RTT, was intended to “encourage and reward states that had demonstrated success in raising student achievement and
had ambitious education reform plans” (Vergari, 2009). In the race, U.S. states were eligible for
$20 million to $700 million grants in educational initiatives and priorities (Vergari, 2009). Thus,
in partnership with the Common Core, “the Race to the Top program fundamentally serves to
induce states to adopt higher standards of learning using financial incentives” from the federal
government (Criterion on RTT, 2014). Forty-six states, including New York State, and the
District of Columbia pledged to adopt Common Core (Hess & McShane, 2018, p. 18).

On December 10, 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)
into law. In doing so, Obama moved away from NCLB practices where “testing and
accountability policy were largely determined in Washington D.C.” by the federal government
(Hess & McShane, 2018, p. 20). ESSA allowed for flexibility of states to implement
accountability measures of their own, which states like New York eventually did. It also
“prohibits the US Education Secretary from forcing or encouraging states to adopt any particular
set of standards such as the Common Core” (Hess & McShane, 2018, p. 64).

“Perceived” Federal Sentiment towards Opt-Out Movement Emergence
Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education under President Obama (2009-2015) was one
of the catalysts for the emergence of the Opt-Out Movement nationally, including New York
State and Long Island. In June 2013, Duncan was discussing opposition to the Common Core
Standards and the new assessments with a gathering of State education superintendents.
Secretary Duncan said about “white moms” that “all of a sudden, their child isn’t as brilliant as
they thought they were and their school isn’t quite as good as they thought … and that’s pretty
scary” (Simon, 2013). Opponents of the comment, like Miami University Professors Andrew
Saultz and Michael Evans, observed that “Secretary Duncan dismissed parental opposition as the
byproduct of self-interested parents who were more concerned about solidifying their social
status than with the quality of education their children received” (Evans & Saultz, 2015). Duncan later apologized for the comment in a blog post on the Department of Education website. Nevertheless, his comments led to petition drives and local movements at the grassroots level in communities to refuse the standardized examinations introduced through Common Core (Simon, 2013).

**Overview of school district governance structure in NYS**

**NYS Constitution**

All fifty states in their respective state constitutions extensively lay out the framework for local control of their public education systems. In the United States, there are nearly 100,000 public schools, which are overseen by almost 14,000 school districts, fifty state governments, and one federal government. This means, public schools are indirectly led by governors, state legislatures, and appointed officials to serve on governing boards and within state-level departments (Manna, McGuinn, & Finn, 2013).

The New York State Constitution lays out this framework discussed by Manna, McGuinn, and Finn (2013). In article XI section I, the first clause of educational administration in the Constitution, reads “the legislature shall provide for the maintenance and support of a system of free common schools, wherein all the children of this state may be educated” (NYS. Const. art. XI, pt. I.). All children in New York State are therefore guaranteed a public education as residents.

**NYS Governor**

There is much variance in K-12 state education systems throughout the United States. Many states have elected state superintendents and state school boards; others have their governor appoint these individuals. Largely conservative and pro-state/local education control
states like Texas and Alabama hold elections for certain offices, while more liberal states like California and New York empower their Governor to make appointments for specific positions (Scudella, 2013).

The top executive of New York State government is the directly elected governor. The governor is able to set the public policy priorities of the state. Governors also create a budget, a part of which pertains to state aid to public schools. Other responsibilities of the governor are to appoint commissions, like that of the education board, and to create governmental programs (Baxter & Amatullah, 2018).

**NYS State Education Commissioner & NYS Board of Regents**

Every state has a state education agency headed by a leader, commonly called the state superintendent, commissioner, or chief state school officer. Those leaders are responsible for administering state and federal policy by providing oversight and guidance to local education authorities, affecting essentially all dimensions of school operations (Manna, McGuinn, & Finn, 2013). In New York State, the Commissioner of Education is the chief executive officer of the Board of Regents. Selected by the Board, the commissioner is “responsible for enforcement of educational laws, compliance with educational policies, and general supervision of schools” (Baxter & Amatullah, 2018).

The Constitution of New York State also creates the Board of Regents and asserts that the head of the NYS Department of Education is designated the Regents of the University of the State of New York. This leadership title is among 13 gubernatorial appointed and voting members representing judicial districts across the State and 4 at-large members totaling 17 voting members (NYS. Const. art. XI, pt. I.; Baxter & Amatullah, 2018). The Board of Regents is responsible for setting overall educational policy including “learning standards, state exams,
data collection and assessment, school report cards, accountability of educational programs, and teacher licenses” (Baxter & Amatullah, 2018).

**NYS Lawmakers**

The New York State Legislature is bi-cameral. The NYS Senate is the upper chamber, and the NYS Assembly is the lower chamber. The legislature, and the lawmakers that make up the legislative bodies, are granted the ability by the Constitution of New York to pass educational laws and appoint the Regents of the State of New York (Baxter & Amatullah, 2018).

**Locally Elected Board of Education**

A local school board is tasked with all legislative priorities of a school district. These priorities must go through the school board to be reviewed and approved. Board members set the policy agenda for the district. They can hire and dismiss administration, select curriculum and instructional materials, develop an annual budget for public approval, negotiate with teachers, (often though not always through unions), and lastly, explain and speak for the school system in public (Manna, McGuinn, & Finn, 2013).

According to the New York State School Boards Association (NYSSBA), general requirements to be a school board member include:

1. Being a U.S. citizen;
2. 18 years old;
3. Qualified voter in the school district;
4. Able to read and write;
5. Resident of their district continuously for one year before the election; and,
6. Cannot be employed by the board on which they will serve or live in the same household with a family member who is also a member of the same school board.

School board elections in New York State are held on the third Tuesday of May. Sixty-four percent of school districts hold "at large" elections for seats on the board. Meaning, the candidates with the most earned votes compared to the number of vacant seats will win a term. Thirty-six percent of school districts have candidates run for specific vacancies on the board, which is classified as an election “by-seat”. School board members typically serve terms of three, four, or up to five years (NYSSBA, 2019).

The number of seats on a respective district school board depends on the individual school districts. In New York State, school boards typically have an odd number of seats on their board to prevent tie-votes. The school board member capacity ranges from five, seven, to nine seats. School board members assume office on July 1\textsuperscript{st} of the calendar year, or immediately after the election if the seat they were elected to was already vacant (NYSSBA, 2019).

**Superintendent of Schools**

A superintendent is selected by the members of the Board of Education of the school district they are in charge of. Figure 2.1 below depicts a typical organizational structure for a school district. As seen in figure 2.1, superintendents act as the chief executive of the school district (Manna, McGuinn, & Finn, 2013). They supervise assistant superintendents and school building principals.
The superintendent, in large part, works in a continuing partnership with members of the Board of Education. The superintendent is charged by the school board with managing the business of the district and serving as “primary initiator of policy” (Glass, 2000). According to Glass (2000) it is unlikely that a school board in the United States would hire a non-educator as a superintendent, being that this role is a highly paid executive position that oversees other educational professionals, curriculum management and strategies, and various educational polices and initiatives.

Fiore (2016) claims that there are two ideal activities of an effective school district superintendent. First, the superintendent needs to bring their team members together in a way that each individual benefit from the knowledge, skills, and experiences of the others. Second, they need to develop and champion a school and community relationship. If they find a balance between the two, they are overall an effective superintendent.
Understanding the Relevance of a Board of Education

Various educational scholars in the United States have debated and examined the local K-12 board of education. On one end, scholars like Jennifer Hochschild have argued that school boards are democratic bastions that allow for local control of a community’s school district. On the other, scholars like Frederick Hess and Olivia Meeks find school boards to be weak and non-essential to the operations of a public-school district.

Jennifer Hochschild has argued that school boards are an effective mechanism of local K-12 education governance. Their purpose is to represent the voices of the local constituency that elected the members to make decisions on their behalf. As such, school boards are designed to be instruments of local democracy (Hochschild, 2005). Since school board members are the only directly selected members of a school district governance structure selected directly by the people of the community, they serve as good microcosms of the educational preferences of citizens within their district (Hochschild, 2005).

Historically, school board elections tend to have low voter turnout. A reason for this may be that citizens are satisfied with the way their school district is run and there is no need for them to turn out and make any sort of change to their governance structure in place (Hochschild, 2005). On the other hand, if there is turnover on the board after an election, that may affect policymaking capabilities of the board and district because of a “loss of institutional or collective memory essential to recall the purpose and intent of previous policies” (Beckham & Klaymeier Wills, 2003).

While yielding to the notion that school boards are in fact democratic bastions, some educational scholars have argued over the years that school boards of education are legislative bodies that are subservient to district administration, like the superintendent. Education scholars
Frederick M. Hess and Olivia Meeks argue that education governance in the United States is fundamentally broken. They criticize school boards for being overly political, skeptical of reform, and too dependent on the viewpoint of the superintendent (Hess & Meeks, 2013). Meanwhile, Bass (2000) found in his study that took into account school district superintendents’ perceptions of their school boards that their members traditionally accept their policy recommendations with little to no challenge. Most superintendents indicated that their primary working relationship with their boards is that of professional advisor and initiator of policy initiatives.

One of the most important roles of a school board is to allow a school district to move forward with policies. School boards function as legislative, executive, and quasi-judicial agencies. Some of the major components of the power of a board of education include following legal mandates based on state and federal legislation, review of district administrative power and work productivity, negotiated teacher union contracts, strategic planning, enhancing public perception of the deliberations and decisions of the board, and curriculum and instruction (Beckham & Klaymeier Wills).

**New York State Context and the Opt-Out Movement**

Governor Andrew M. Cuomo assumed office as New York’s 56th Governor in January 2011. Though Governor Cuomo served as Governor until 2021, many of the policies administered surrounding the start of the Opt-Out Movement and its political organization on Long Island occurred during his first and second term. The Opt-Out Movement on Long Island continues to the present day, with a strong Opt-Out Organization acting as a political force in school district politics and policy discussions.
As discussed below, there were three launching pads for the emergence of the Opt-Out Movement throughout New York State, including Long Island. The first in the initial implementation of the Common Core Standards. The second is the passage of the New York State property tax cap law in 2011. And lastly, Governor Cuomo’s push to tie teacher evaluations to student scores on exams.

First, New York State opted into the Common Core State Standards Initiative in January 2011. The New York State Board of Regents, through the RTT application submitted by then-Governor David Paterson, Cuomo’s predecessor, pledged to do so and directed the State Education Department to begin implementation immediately (Parsons, 2015).

In 2011, the New York State legislature passed, and Governor Cuomo signed, the property tax cap into law. The intent of the cap is to “stop top skyrocketing property tax increases on homeowners and businesses” (The Associated Press, 2013). The NYS tax cap law limits the annual increase of property taxes levied by a local government and school district to two percent or the rate of inflation, whichever is less (NYS DTF). While the cap does not apply to New York City because the city does not have independent school districts within the city system, it does apply to schools in regions like Long Island, where independent school districts are predominant.

Each year on Long Island and across the state, school districts put forward to their communities their annual budget vote for the residents of the school district community to review and vote for or against. The tax cap limits the amount a school district can allocate in spending. If the school district decides to “pierce the cap” by increasing their budget by more than the cap allows; 60 percent plus 1 of the voters at the polls need to approve such an increase (NYS DTF).
The tax cap was a launching pad for the Opt-Out Movement, because of the sentiments around the cap and claims that it infringes on local control of education by school districts. Teachers unions, like the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) oppose the cap. They claim it “hurts students” by denying equitable resources and opportunities to students and does not allow school districts, especially those from lower-income neighborhoods, to provide for their population through tight fiscal constraints and limitations. It is also perceived as “undemocratic” by allowing a 40.1% voting minority to defeat an otherwise majority approved budget (NYSUT Communications, 2019).

The third launching pad for the Opt-Out cause was teacher evaluations. In 2015, the New York State legislature passed, and Governor Cuomo signed, the *Education Transformation Act* of 2015. Some of the components of the legislation include:

1. Scholarship programs to provide funding for students who commit to the teaching profession;
2. A teacher “bar” exam that requires teachers to complete 100 hours of continuing education over 5 years or lose their teaching license; and,
3. A new teacher evaluation system where districts use standardized tests to evaluate the effectiveness of a classroom teacher. This tied fifty percent of a teacher’s evaluation to their students’ scores on Common Core tests (Ciaccio, et al., 2017, p. 3).

It is important to note that after backlash from local teachers’ unions and parents, the Regents placed a four-year moratorium on use of student scores on state standardized tests to evaluate job performances of teachers and principals. Therefore, the tying of scores initially authored in the *Education Transformation Act* of 2015 was halted temporarily. In January 2019, the New York State Legislature, with Governor Cuomo’s signature, ended the mandate that tied teacher
evaluations to student scores on state tests (Hildebrand, 2019). However, the emergence of the Opt-Out Organization as a local grassroots organization can still be attributed to the introduction of this teacher evaluation system, due to overwhelming opposition among pro-Opt-Out Movement actors.

**Emergence of Opt-Out Movement on Long Island**

“Teacher Evaluations” can be comparatively referred to as the “Lexington and Concord” of the Long Island Opt-Out Movement. This analogy, referring to the start of the American Revolution, begins in Spring 2014, when exam opt-outs started on Long Island. Parent and teacher opposition to exams aligned with the Common Core academic standards was one of the main catalysts for the spark of the movement (Hildebrand, 2019). Observing test boycotts that were driven in part by opposition to the linkage of student tests scores to job ratings, then NYS Commissioner of Education Mary Ellen Elia said they “caused upset across the entire education world in New York State” (Hildebrand, 2019).

**Examining the Opt-Out Decision Process**

The next two sections will examine both the opt-out decision process for a parent/guardian to opt their child out of the state exams. Also covered will be more specific details into why parents/guardians opt their child out of exams and where the decision is strongest in communities across Long Island. It is critical in this overall discussion to review elements of the process and actors involved in order to acquire a firmer understanding of the electoral components that will soon be discussed.

*The Every Students Succeeds Act of 2015 (‘ESSA’) maintained the administration of statewide standardized testing in ELA and math in grades 3-8, similar to provisions in NCLB. While it is required that 95 percent of all students be assessed annually, the law permits states*
can adopt accountability measures for school districts (NYSED.gov). In New York State, the New York State Department of Education (“NYSED”) published their accountability system that measures indicators of educational quality in: Student Academic Achievement; Student Growth; Academic Progress; English Language Proficiency; Chronic Absenteeism; Graduate Rates; and, College, Career, and Civic Readiness (NYSED.gov).

Most key to this dissertation is ESSA’s assertion that school districts inform parents and guardians of opt-out policies. The law also permits a parent’s right to opt their child out of statewide standardized tests where state and local policies permit. Understanding this feature of ESSA, states do not have to address the right for parents to opt-out (NYSUT). In New York State, which does not allow nor prohibit the right to opt-out, the decision is left open for parents and school districts to encourage or discourage.

The opt-out process is different in each school district. According to NYSUT, parents/guardians are encouraged to check with the school building principal or a district administrator to find out about the district opt-out process. This is because school districts do not have a formal universal process that each follows. NYSUT, therefore, encourages parents/guardians to write and send a letter to the school principal informing them that their child will not be taking the tests and will need alternative activities arranged for when the test is administered to classroom peers. NYSUT advises that all requests should be in writing to allow for paper documentation of the request to opt-out. The letter is to be provided to the principal prior to the start of the state testing period, or in advance, like the first day of school to ensure processing and action (NYSUT, 2020).
Examining the Opt-Out Decision on Long Island

This section will discuss Long Island as a region and how it has emerged as an epicenter of the Opt-Out Movement’s strength in New York State. It will include features of who and where on Long Island the Opt-Out Movement and its agenda is most popular with. Demographic trends in individual and community settings will be addressed.

Who opts out on Long Island?

In August 2015, the *New York Times* published data with graphics titled “The Growing Strength of New York’s ‘Opt-Out’ Movement”. Within this piece, journalist Elizabeth Harris (2015) framed the Opt-Out Movement as more prevalent in white middle- and upper-middle-class districts, with Long Island a particular “hot spot.” Figure 2.2 below details the reality of districts throughout Long Island and the 2015 opt-out rates they reported.

![Long Island Opt-Out Rates by District, 2015](image)

*Figure 2.2 (Adapted from Harris, 2015)*

Well over a majority of public-school districts in both Nassau and Suffolk counties reported opt-out rates of over more than 5% in 2015, at the height of the movement. A
substantial number of districts reported more than 50% of students who opted out. Therefore, a majority of at-age test taking students did not participate in the state exams in these districts. Harris (2015) argues that the trend of school district opt-out rates corresponds with the demographic makeup of the district community. She concludes that largely white, middle-to-upper class communities opted out at higher rates than communities of color and/or lower income communities. Many of these strong opt-out communities reside on the south shore of Long Island, mainly in Suffolk County.

Along income lines, Harris (2015) looked at the Opt-Out Movement by gathering district information pertaining to the percentage of students who qualify for subsidized lunch, versus that of opting out of state tests. Districts with fewer students eligible for subsidized lunch had higher opt-out rates. Students who qualified for subsidized lunch were least likely to opt-out. Figure 2.3 below depicts the data breakdown of the correlation between the two items of measurement.

**Figure 2.3: Relationship Between Opt-Out Rates & Subsidized Lunch**

*Figure 2.3 (Adapted from Harris, 2015)*
Understanding Economic & Social Capital

Harris (2015) illuminated the reality of “who” is behind Long Island’s large opt-out numbers for it to be considered the “hot spot” in New York State. The next question to consider is why? Why do we see such demographic disparities among opt-out students? As discussed below, different academic scholars have extensively written about the impact that one’s capital, economic and social, have on a person. They have also written at length about the positive impact of how involved parents transform a child’s education.

Varying scholars have offered a wide range of what the term “capital” truly means. An overall consensus among them is that capital refers to “a resource with which one can create or earn more resources,” “something that one can invest in and accumulate,” and is “itself produced- capital would not include inborn talents” (Vogt, 1997, p. 9). Vogt (1997) also examines different forms of capital. Social capital is one’s identity, values, and social network (p. 10). While Vogt (1997) does not discuss economic capital, it is important to point it out, for Harris (2015) demonstrates its impact on opt-out decision making. Economic capital is as simple as one’s income or wealth (Bourdieu, 1986).

Both social and economic capital can translate into the opt-out decision a parent/guardian makes. Those in the upper socio-economic class tend to be most politically active, while those in lower socio-economic classes tend to be least active (Verba, et al., 1995). Therefore, one’s economic capital translates into their social class identification. According to Rossides’ (1990) Social Class Typology, one’s class identification influences the education of children. Those in the upper classes have the educational system in their favor. Those in the middle have a greater chance of college, while those in the working class have a greater tendency to enter vocational programs. But, for those at the bottom of the class structure, often those in poor/poverty-stricken
neighborhoods, there is little involvement in education resulting in high dropout rates (Rossides, 1990, pp. 406-408).

Hochschild and Scovronick (2003) take Rosside’s social class typology a step further, though indirectly. They write that one’s neighborhood lines, and thus their school district lines, are inseparable from the structure of class. With that, an inequality exists among what communities are served by what school district. Data suggests that many people living in today’s poorer school neighborhoods are largely people of color (Hochschild & Scovronick, 2003, Ch. 3). This trend was also seen in a more recent neighborhood poverty analysis administered by National Equity Atlas. As seen in Harris’ (2015) collection of opt-out data compared to income level, poorer districts had lower opt-out rates than wealthier districts.

**Parental Involvement & Impact on the Opt-Out Decision Among Communities of Color**

Scholars disagree on the definition of parental involvement. Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) define parental involvement as “the dedication of resources by the parent to the child within a given domain.” Larocque, Kleiman, and Darling (2011) define it as “family involvement that can be generally defined as the parents’ or caregivers’ investment in the education of their children.” A third definition is “parents’ behaviors in home and school setting meant to support their children’s educational progress” (El Nokali, Bachman, and Votruba-Drzal, 2010).

Some of the most prominent, and thus most frequently investigated factors, of the impact on a parent’s involvement in their child’s education include ethnicity, prior achievement of the parent(s), and socioeconomic status (Kohl, Lengua, and McMahon, 2000). In his study of parental involvement of minority populations, William Jeynes (2017) argued that African American and Hispanic/Latino parents are not as involved at the elementary school levels. This
may be perhaps due to higher rates of financial strains to make ends meet, family dissolution, and time constraints among these particular racial demographics. These factors make it more difficult for parents in this demographic to be as involved in their child’s education as they might preferably like (Jeynes, 2017). Thus, they may not engage in the opt-out process at rates of white and Asian parents/guardians. There are sociological assumptions as a result of increased wealth and class stratification within these communities of color that may play into the lack of momentum the Opt-Out Movement has within these community demographics.

**Long Island by the Numbers: A Snapshot**

Since the emergence of the Opt-Out Movement in 2014, *Newsday*, one of Long Island’s top newspaper conglomerates has published opt-out numbers per school district for both the ELA and mathematics exams. Each district self-reports their opt-out numbers and *Newsday* compiles a matrix for subscribers to read each year. There are five consecutive years of data, from 2015 to 2019. There is no relevant data for the 2020 exams due to the suspension by the Board of Regents as a result of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Tyrrell, 2020).

There is an argument to be made among the available data provided that the Opt-Out Movement’s strength is concentrated in middle-high income, predominately White neighborhoods. When looking at the published data compared to demographic information provided by the United States Census Bureau, there is a clearer correlation. Both tables 2.1 and 2.2 below detail the Opt-Out Movement’s strength in six selected public-school districts representing both Nassau and Suffolk Counties.
Table 2.1: Example Long Island Public School District Opt-Out Rates for the NYS ELA Assessment- Years 2016-2019

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hempstead School District</td>
<td>Minority-Majority</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyandanch School District</td>
<td>Minority-Majority</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patchogue-Medford School District</td>
<td>Mixed-White Majority</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>79.5%</td>
<td>79.3%</td>
<td>76.0%</td>
<td>77.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jericho School District</td>
<td>Mixed-White Majority</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garden City School District</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Affluent</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
<td>30.6%</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
<td>44.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Islip School District</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Affluent</td>
<td>73.5%</td>
<td>72.6%</td>
<td>72.8%</td>
<td>73.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau; Newsday- Diamond, 2019
Table 2.2: Example Long Island Public School District Opt-Out Rates for the NYS Math Assessment- Years 2016-2019

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hempstead School District</td>
<td>Minority-Majority</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyandanch School District</td>
<td>Minority-Majority</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patchogue-Medford School District</td>
<td>Mixed-White Majority</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>79.2%</td>
<td>78.8%</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
<td>74.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jericho School District</td>
<td>Mixed-White Majority</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garden City School District</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Affluent</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
<td>29.9%</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
<td>44.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Islip School District</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Affluent</td>
<td>73.9%</td>
<td>72.7%</td>
<td>70.8%</td>
<td>74.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau; Newsday- Diamond, 2019

Over a span of four years, the data details the Opt-Out Movement’s strength in more middle- and upper-class Long Island neighborhoods where white residents are particularly concentrated. Garden City, one of the wealthiest school districts in Nassau County, sits next door to the Hempstead School District. Aside from the income/wealth disparities of the two neighboring communities, the opt-out numbers of the two school districts are substantially different. Both tables 2.1 and 2.2 provided by Newsday, with empirical support provided by the U.S. Census Bureau show that White, middle to higher income school districts on Long Island
are opting out their children at consistently higher rates than minority-majority schools in lower income neighborhoods.

Professor Amy Stuart Wells of Columbia University summarized Long Island school districts in a way that captures the essence of what table 1.1 and table 2.1 detail about the stratification of school districts and their opt-out strength:

If ever there were any doubt that Long Island, New York, is home to some of the most fragmented, segregated and unequal school districts in the United States, the January 2009 Long Island Index Report, provides ample evidence that this is indeed the case. The quantifiable inequities across the 125 school districts on Long Island in terms of funding, demographics, and student outcomes highlighted in that report portray how important district boundary lines are, even within relatively small geographic spaces (Stuart Wells, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

By studying the political ramifications of the Long Island Opt-Out Movement, this dissertation will grant insight into the political and electoral impact on school board elections in high opt-out Long Island public school districts. In doing so, this study will illuminate elements of several leading theories and frameworks. These include the theories of Social Movement and Political Spectacle. In addition, the work of John Kingdon helps present the opt-out story and overall analysis.

The Social Movement Theory

The Social Movement theory focuses on “organized yet informal social entities that are engaged in extra-institutional conflict that is oriented towards a goal” (Christiansen, 2009). There
are four stages within a social movement: emergence, coalescence, bureaucratization, and decline. The Social Movement theory and the four stages presented within help explain the trending organizational success the Opt-Out Movement has had since 2014.

In the emergence stage, the Opt-Out Movement had its preliminary start with little to no grassroots organization. Yet, what was emerging at the time was widespread discontent regarding something, like the emergence of math and ELA exams and their ramifications on schools, teachers and students. Participants who will soon form the grassroots movement, when thinking in chronological order of the phenomenon, are growing unhappy with what they are seeing but have not taken any official action to address these grievances (Christiansen, 2009).

In the coalescence stage, things are moving slowly. There is still no organizational mobility or widespread individual mobilization. However, the “sea of discontent” is now larger among people than it was in the emerging stage. Then comes the bureaucratization stage, where a movement like the Opt-Out Movement becomes formalized. “In this stage, social movements have had some success in that they have raised awareness to a degree that a coordinated strategy is necessary…” (Christiansen, 2009). Therefore, a coalition is formed, like the Long Island Opt-Out Organization, a local grassroots organization that supports opt-out policy, new approaches to educational instruction, and looks to implement these changes through school board elections. Social movements in the bureaucratization stage begin to recruit leaders to train and carry out functions of the organization (Christiansen, 2009).

When it comes to the decline stage, there are more intricacies. The social movement can go in various directions. This is where, politically and electorally speaking, the Long Island Opt-Out Organization is examined within this research study. Has the organization been repressed? Co-opted? Successful? Or has it failed? There is insufficient evidence that the Long Island Opt-
Out Organization is declining where it has consistently been strong, let alone through repression. Repression occurs when “authorities, or agents acting on behalf of the authorities, use measures (sometimes violent) to control or destroy a social movement” (Christiansen, 2009). While there have been some efforts by school district authorities to limit the amount of student opt-outs from exams, per the Long Island Opt-Out Facebook page, there is no evidence of repression to the extent the theory suggests (LIOO Facebook). The Long Island Opt-Out Facebook page, the main social media platform where actors post about current events occurring in school districts across Long Island, is a resource for this study as it allows for the most up-to-date information of the movement’s strength inside Long Island school districts.

In terms of co-optation movements, the meaning behind this element is also that of a decline in the movement. A movement declines because the organization is highly dependent on a centralized authority and less on the grassroots level participants engaging in the movement (Christiansen, 2009). Certainly, over the years the Long Island Opt-Out Movement as a political organization has featured individuals who have been charismatic leaders who have centralized their authority in order to execute its overall mission, but there is no evidence that the movement has been co-opted by individuals who have moved the organization in another direction from its initial purpose.

“Smaller and more localized movements with very specific goals often have a better chance at outright success” (Christiansen, 2009). The Long Island Opt-Out Organization is a local, grassroots advocacy group that has been successful in particular demographic constituencies as previously mentioned. However, Christiansen (2009) associates “success” with eventual “decline” because the movement has completed its mission in this scenario. While there is empirical evidence to suggests that in certain districts on Long Island, the percentage of opt-
out students is declining year to year, there are others that show steady figures. According to the LIOO website, the organization, though unconfirmed, says they have 25,000 members and over 200,000 parents in support of their agenda. This, as they claim, signifies a continued effort to keep the movement alive throughout the region. Therefore, while successful in many districts, it does not justify a determination that the movement is on the decline or has failed.

**Political Spectacle Theory**

Murray Edelman (1988) coined the political spectacle theory in response to what was being seen politically throughout the country during the administration of U.S. President Ronald Reagan. His developed theory, now more than thirty years old, is applicable to the Long Island Opt-Out Organization and its electoral strategies to mobilize voters to the polls. Edelman (1988) suggested that ideologically motivated actors are able to create policy through the “spectacle” of dramatic public displays. His theory of political spectacle is therefore defined as “elements of a movement that include symbolic language, dramaturgy, political actors cast as leaders, enemies, and allies” (Edelman, 1988). All of these essential features of political spectacle theory can be seen throughout the “political stream” of the Kingdon framework soon to be discussed along with its application with the Opt-Out Organization on Long Island.

It is also important to note that while Edelman focused primarily on national politics and the availability of the mass market television stage, Szolowicz (2016) took it a step further to the modern day. With the emergence of new media, like that of the internet and social media, the political spectacle of modern-day grassroots movements has taken a new turn, as they are able to reach across a wide spectrum of people by the masses and engage them into the conversation and through possible action.
**The Kingdon Framework**

John W. Kingdon in *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* provides a framework for this dissertation on the Long Island Opt-Out Movement. In his work, Kingdon asked two essential questions: what factors determine what items are or are not put on the policy agenda and what factors control the decision-making process for policy makers to make a final decision? To answer these questions, Kingdon presents what he titles “the three streams.” These three streams are the “Problem Steam,” the “Policy Stream,” and the “Political Stream.” In order for movement to occur on both essential questions, the three separate streams eventually come together at critical times (Kingdon, 2011, p. 165). Figure 2.4, depicted below, details this reality. Once all three streams converge with one another, it allows for a policy window, or sometimes noted as a window of opportunity, to emerge. Dynamics in this window can yield new agenda items and major policy change.

**Figure 2.4: The Three Streams Converging**

![Figure 2.4](Kingdon, 2011)
The Three Streams and Window of Opportunity

Kingdon suggests that a condition becomes a problem when one decides to try and do something about the condition (Kingdon, 2011, p. 109). There needs to be an increased call for attention on a particular issue for the emergence of the problem stream. Identifying what this issue or problem is allows for the first stream in the Kingdon framework to take shape. Indicators, focusing events, and feedback are examples of ways one can identify a developing issue or problem. First, indicators, like changes in prices or a decrease in high test scores, allow policymakers to acknowledge and assess a problem. Second, feedback are channels of communication to policymakers that allow people, like constituents, to bring a problem to their attention. Lastly, focusing events, which can be defined as driving forces that cause change, like national mood, organizational interests, and election repercussion, open the window and lead to restructuring of the policy agenda.

Once a problem or issue has been identified in the problem stream, the policy stream can converge with the latter. Kingdon asks in the policy stream if there is informed policy being introduced backed by evidence and research to counter the traditional model or way of doing things which has caused the initial problem to come about in the problem stream (Kingdon, 2011, Ch. 6). The policy stream is mostly hidden specialists who develop possible solutions to a problem. The driving force of these differing philosophical approaches and/or solutions to address the problem are largely contributed by interest groups who are committed to a particular policy change.

The next and final stream to converge is the political stream. Within this stream, political participants engage with the problem at hand and the actors involved in the policy stream. This allows for the development of some of the major components of Kingdon’s political stream, which include swings of mood and the altering balance of organized political forces (Kingdon,
For example, swings of mood can occur among the public, who decide through electoral means to change the trajectory of the policy being enforced or the issue at hand. This can then affect the political forces of a governing body, whose agenda can be altered since new individuals are seated at the governing table with differing philosophical approaches.

Kingdon defines windows as an opening of an opportunity, where the result of a change occurs in the problem or political stream (Kingdon, 2011). The three streams converge and make major policy change a possibility. Windows of opportunity are usually open for a short amount of time. Advocates of policy change must be prepared to capitalize on the windows quickly.

Key Players of the Long Island Opt-Out Movement throughout the “Streams”

Kingdon (2011) is the leading theoretical framework that applies to the story of the Long Island Opt-Out Organization and the idea of its effect on altering organized political forces to change policy agendas of local school boards of education. However, the theories provided by Edelman (1988) and Christiansen (2009) will not go unnoticed. Important to the overall discussion of this political phenomenon continuing to the present day, both theoretical frameworks are illuminated within Kingdon’s streams at specific points in time. The following analysis will tell the story of the Long Island Opt-Out Movement over the years, using the Kingdon framework. Where this analysis ends are where the dissertation questions begin: within the political stream of the Kingdon framework, and the opening of windows of opportunity.

The Problem Stream

This literature review has discussed the historical nature of the testing movement in the United States and the implications of both federal and New York State education policies on assessment and accountability measures. The Long Island Opt-Out Movement emerged as a
social movement, looping back to Christensen’s (2009) framework, around the 2013-2014 school year, when exams aligned with the Common Core academic standards were first being implemented in school districts.

Long Island resident and parent Jeanette Deutermann, a policy entrepreneur in the Kingdon framework, is the founder and leader of the current Long Island Opt-Out Organization. She summarized it best for understanding on why she supports the opt-out decision. She wrote in 2013:

My name is Jeanette Deutermann. I am the parent of a fifth grader and a second grader. I became involved in this movement almost before it could be called a movement. I became involved when the high stakes testing and the test-driven curriculum it creates, significantly changed my 10-year old’s attitude towards school in profoundly negative ways. He went from a child who looked forward to school in the morning and would return home talking about the projects and interesting things that went on in the classroom, to a child who cried at night, had stomach aches, and begged to stay home in the morning. This behavior began abruptly during the middle of his third-grade year, two months before his first state assessment. The behaviors continued until the day I told him he would not be participating in the 4th-grade state assessments, a little over a year later. The relief on his face told me all I needed to know about what was causing his dramatic shift (Strauss, 2013).

Other parents and guardians decided to opt-out their child out of state assessments citing various reasons for doing so. Aside from the emotional and at times, physical impacts on young children as Jeanette Deutermann cited, some parents feared and continue to fear that the
assessments take away from local control of education where school districts can administer exams and assessment practices in accordance with the uniqueness of their student population. They also see education being taken over by the interests of “big business” (McNulty, 2015). They fear the collection of student data is being used by textbook companies or government bureaucrats to profit or make more exams from student data collected (Berry, 2014). As a result, the beginning of the bureaucratization stage of Christiansen’s (2009) social movement framework begins, and concerned parents begin to communicate and form the now-strong Long Island Opt-Out Organization, led by Jeanette Deutermann.

The increasing realization of this problem among many parents and teachers during the beginning of the 2014 calendar year brings within the discussion the concept of time. Kogan, et al. (2018) looked at school districts in several states and the timing of their budget and school board elections. In New York State, school board elections are held on the third Tuesday of May (NYSSBA). As opt-out concerns grew in early January of that year, there was arguably enough time for concerned citizens on the state tests to coalesce around the deemed problem and do something about it by spring elections. Kogan, et al. (2018) used the concept of time to supply electoral context in this example. Time provides clarity to the what, why, and how of this emergence of opt-out sentiment and its initial effect of calling attention to right the problem. The May 2014 school elections provided the first wave of electoral data to know and understand for this research. Timing became and continues to be political for pro-opt-out actors in this educational phenomenon.

Long Island parents began seeing varying problems with state testing that resulted in these “state tests” being the problem facing many students, teachers, and school districts throughout Long Island. We began to see the ingredients for the emergence of the problem
stream of the Kingdon framework at this point in late 2013/early 2014 right before the spring administered math and ELA exams were to take place. Kingdon emphasized indicators in the problem stream. In this case, parents were concerned, students were stressed, and teachers were worried about their job performance expectations, as well as the care for their students.

*The Policy Stream*

Arguably the policy stream has been the longest running stream of the Kingdon framework when applied to this research. We now understand much of the historical implications that policy across the federal and state government had on local districts, dating back to the 1980’s. When discussing these streams, especially the policy stream, we are now looking at local districts over the last six years on Long Island but not forgetting the federal and state policy history that applies to this analysis. The Long Island Opt-Out Organization that forms when the problem of testing and the implications it brings to students and teachers has been identified in the problem stream, allows for the emergence of new policy being introduced to counter it.

Aside from policy pertaining to the initial preference for exams by policymakers, the administration of the exams in school districts, and the opt-out decision process that have been discussed in this proposal, the Opt-Out Movement allowed for the introduction of the Whole Child Theory. This theory counters the testing philosophies that currently exist in educational policy. In the policy stream, leading actors emerged, from teachers’ unions to parents leading the Long Island Opt-Out Organization. The actors placed particular emphasis on school districts implementing lesson plans and curriculum structures surrounding enactment of the Whole Child Theory. Whole Child Theory, as a holistic approach, seeks to “transition schools and systems from a focus on narrowly defined academic achievement to one that promotes the long-term development and life success of all children. At its core, a whole child education is one in which
students are healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged” (Griffith, et al, 2018). Proponents of Whole Child Theory fear that the ongoing “assessment culture,” because of NCLB, ESSA, and Common Core as examples, excludes other educational goals that seek to promote student health and welfare; physical, social, emotional, and psychological development; critical and creative thinking; and communication and collaboration abilities (Darling-Hammond, et al, 2018, p. 2). Whole Child Theory seeks to incorporate these specific educational priorities into the curriculum, and thus, into the classroom and move away from the more traditional approach of student testing.

**Figure 2.5: Long Island Opt-Out Organization “Upstanders”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dr. Michael Hynes Superintendent</th>
<th>Farmingdale Federation of Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North Shore Teachers</td>
<td>Valley Stream Teachers Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brentwood Teachers Association</td>
<td>Middle Country Administrators/Teachers Association/PTA/PTSA Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sachem School District</td>
<td>Bellmore-Merrick School District</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Whole Child Theory is the leading policy that counters the current federal and state accountability measures in place to the present day. Both local teachers unions and the Long Island Opt-Out Organization have endorsed this alternate approach to student educational development, as seen in figure 2.5. The Long Island Opt-Out Organization titled these unions, districts, and school officials as “upstanders” for endorsing their platform and ideas. Their Facebook page provides the actors involved in the education and encouragement of the opt-out decision. As a result, the policy stream has allowed for a flow of differing theory and different policy approaches to handle student achievement and accountability issues. The Kingdon framework now moves to the political stream, where community opt-out data and elections lead to a potential window of opportunity for the opt-out movement.
The Political Stream

What started out as a small group of people, who as Diane Ravitch (2004) exclaims, can “make a lot of noise,” the Long Island Opt-Out Organization and its allies have been large and loud. Within the political stream, community members have mobilized to challenge policy made in the policy stream over the last three decades or so, and alternative approaches to handling student achievement and development at the K-12 level have emerged. On top of the actors in the other two streams, such as concerned parents, school administrators, lawmakers, teachers unions, and students, we now see the introduction of candidates for local boards of education taking their ideological approaches to the opt-out/whole child issue to the electoral and school governance process.

The political stream illuminates Edelman’s (1988) theory of political spectacle. The dramaturgy arose through campaigns and elections for school boards across Long Island is alive and well. Social media and the news media have also facilitated the movement, by getting their messages out to a wide array of people. For example, Wang (2017) highlighted the tremendous impact of local actors on educational decision making. He uncovered the Opt-Out Organization’s power structure, that being teachers’ unions. Teachers unions, by robocalling and utilizing social media platforms, propelled the idea into parents’ minds to opt their child out of exams to “take back control” of public education. Wang (2017) wrote, “many opt-out parents saw standardized testing as part of a corporate takeover agenda to wring profits from public education by charging districts for testing costs…” (p. 13).

In May 2015, more than 90 percent of hundreds of union-backed candidates won seats on school boards throughout New York State (Hoskin, 2015). In 2020, shown in figure 2.6, the Long Island Opt-Out Organization endorsed 41 candidates for school board for the May 2020
elections. Of the 41 endorsed candidates, 26 won their elections with Opt-Out Organizational support (Deutermann, 2019). To note, the year 2020 is used to portray Opt-Out candidate success in an election year that this study does not examine.

Symbolic language, like the terms “opt-out” or “refuse the tests” have become hallmark slogans of the political organization. In figure 2.7, the New York State Allies for Public Education (NYSAPE), an interest group politically allied with the Long Island Opt-Out Organization and teachers unions, funded trucks to display opt-out symbolic language to promote the decision to parents across Long Island. There have also been figures cast as enemies of opt-out. Figure 2.8 depicts an “opt-in” letter published by the Uniondale School District encouraging parents to have their students take the exams.

Window of Opportunity

According to John Kingdon, a window of opportunity can occur because of a “focusing event” (Kingdon, 2011). The story of the Opt-Out Movement on Long Island merits its careful examination. Overall, the Long Island Opt-Out Organization has been successful electorally, based on the school board seats they have won in each school election cycle. But are these elections focusing events? Henig, et. al., (2019) said that “… local arenas are important sites for agenda setting and political engagement over education issues.” Did Whole Child Theory, for example, come about due to the seating of Long Island Opt-Out Organization endorsed candidates on school boards?

The overall concept of a window of opportunity in this case takes this research and its questions to the next research phase. It is also important to not overlook the “success” rate of the Social Movement theory idea. This dissertation will examine several Long Island public school
districts to determine whether the opt-out movement has been successful in not only winning elections but altering the policy agenda from the inside.
Figure 2.6: 2020 Opt-Out Endorsed Candidates

Figure 2.7: Promotion of Symbolic Language

Figure 2.8: Opt-In Letter from Uniondale School District

Cumulative Source: Long Island Opt-Out Facebook Page (Long Island Opt-Out Info)
Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The methodology is a qualitative, case study examination of four Long Island school districts and the electoral impact of the Long Island Opt-Out Organization on district school board leadership and agenda-setting. Opt-out and election result data were previously collected by Newsday. I also collected and analyzed data derived from interviews and documents.

This chapter first details the significance of this research study. Second, it describes the case study as a research approach. Third, the research questions are presented. Fourth, the case selection is described. The chapter concludes with the steps taken to safeguard legitimacy and ensure the integrity of the research process.

Significance of the Study

The literature review presented an unfinished story when looking at the Long Island Opt-Out Movement through a political lens. Chapter 2 reviewed the contextual history of testing reform in the United States and New York State. Chapter 2 also discussed why and how the Opt-Out Movement emerged as a grassroots political and educational reform initiative and its formation as an influential electoral organization in school district politics and elections. Lastly, the movement continues to have steady popularity among school communities on Long Island. However, the Long Island Opt-Out story does not end with the literature review, as there is more to the story to discover and understand.

There is more about the Long Island Opt-Out Movement for researchers, political scientists, educators, and other interested readers to comprehend and recognize from a political and electoral point of view. As a student of political science and education policy, I aimed to add
to the existing research on the Opt-Out Movement that mostly takes a historical and sociological perspective.

The significance of this study is that it builds on prior research by bringing more elements of political science into the discussion. The research questions focus on electoral politics and political opt-out dynamics involving the local school board and central administration. Using the research of scholars like Robert K. Yin (2018) to develop my research plan, this case study uncovered important facts and dynamics of the Long Island Opt-Out Movement.

Research Questions

The research questions in this study refer to four Long Island public school districts during the years 2014-2019; from the beginning of the Opt-Out Movement (2014) to the most recent year when exams were administered in New York State (2019).

Below are the research questions for this analysis with supporting details.

Research Question One

What were the most publicly discussed issues in each school board race?

a. Within the course of the campaign, when and how did opt-out receive attention?

b. Within the course of the campaign, when and how did Whole Child Theory receive attention?

Bringing in an electoral analysis lens within the study of political science, research question one focused on school board campaigns and elections in the four school districts. Emphasis was placed on issues discussed on the campaign trail, including the Whole Child
Theory, the leading public reform policy that actors within the Opt-Out Organization have endorsed to replace reliance on state testing.

**Research Question Two**

Were there any policy entrepreneurs in the four districts focused on opt-out and Whole Child Theory during 2014-2019? If so, whom, when and where? What were their positions and activities? How do they fit the definition of a policy entrepreneur?

Based on the work of John Kingdon, research question two looks at policy entrepreneurs as part of the policy stream in his 3-stream framework. On the campaign trail and within policy implementation, can a policy entrepreneur be found within the storyline of any of the four districts researched? Were any individual actors looking to influence local constituents, candidates, school board policies, and/or actions to support the Whole Child Theory?

**Research Question Three**

Among the school board candidates, what were their declared positions on opt-out and Whole Child Theory? What were the 2014-2019 election results for each category (a b c below)?

a. Incumbents
b. Challengers
c. Open Seat Candidates

Research question three narrows down each campaign and election for school board in each of the four selected districts. This question allowed me to dive deeper into six consecutive school board elections for each district. It uncovered the electoral success of school board
incumbents, challengers to incumbents seeking re-election, and candidates seeking an open trustee seat on a board of education. Particular emphasis was placed on the candidates covered in this case study analysis and how they approached the Whole Child Theory as not only a policy initiative, but an action to be done in the classroom.

**Research Question Four**

Across the four districts, is there any evidence that school board incumbent electoral defeats were “focusing events” as defined by Kingdon? Was this the case for any open seat races?

a. In each case, were there any major changes in board policy agendas pertaining to opt-out and Whole Child Theory as a result of the focusing event?

b. Were any major policy changes pertaining to opt-out and Whole Child Theory adopted?

The literature review discussed the concept of “focusing events” and “windows of opportunity.” Research question four sought to uncover whether the defeat of school board incumbents by challengers created a window for the entrance and placement of Whole Child Theory on a school district’s policy agenda.

**Case Study Research Method**

The guiding framework of this qualitative case study was based on the work of Robert K. Yin (2018). A case study “investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context” (p. 15). A case study tries to illuminate decisions, why decisions were made, how decisions were implemented, and the results (Yin, 2018). The Long Island Opt-Out Organization, as discussed in chapter 2, started as a grassroots, parent-run organization that has turned into a political and electoral influencer in local school district politics and agenda setting. This research
looked at several decision-making practices, as described in the research questions section of this chapter.

According to Yin (2018), there are five components of a case study research design:

1. A case study’s questions;
2. Its propositions, if any;
3. Its case(s);
4. The logic linking the data to the propositions; and
5. The criteria for interpreting the findings (p. 29).

This dissertation addressed all five of these critical components. Questions were asked about the political, electoral, and agenda setting dynamics on school boards in the Long Island school districts selected for the case study. Yin (2018) also mentions “propositions” which “direct attention to something that should be examined” in this study (p. 27). These include “how” and “why” questions. Both of these questions allowed me as a researcher to inquire more into the Opt-Out Movement. How it has played out in selected districts and why it has or has not been impactful electorally and/or on the agenda setting of the district are some examples.

Case Selection

As discussed in the literature review, Newsday, Long Island’s major newspaper conglomerate, publishes annual data on school district self-reported opt-out numbers on both the mathematics and ELA exams each spring. About a month after these data points are published, Newsday also covers school district board of education elections and publishes results on election night in mid-May. These data figures that Newsday compiles allowed me to get a better understanding of some background details of each school district. Case studies may involve similar or dissimilar cases. I was interested in similarities in school districts when it comes to certain variables.
I discovered the extent to which high opt-out rates on state tests impact electoral politics and agenda setting for Long Island school districts. For example, if a district had low opt-out rates year after year with no turnover of board members, it was assumed that there was little relevance to what this study was trying to uncover. On the other hand, if a district had turnover on the school board and also had high opt-out rates on the tests, then that district was considered for inclusion in this study.

Four Long Island public school districts were selected for this case study. The focus of this research sought to see how the Opt-Out Organization has impacted school board elections and agenda setting in four school districts. For example, have opt-out dynamics been associated with realigned political and governing alliances among district leadership and the board of education? Have there been consequent changes in the district’s agenda towards state-mandated assessments? All four school districts, however, must meet the following criteria:

1. They must reflect similar opt-out figures consistently over the last six years in both the ELA and mathematics state exams.
2. They must reflect similar community demographics to control for differences in socioeconomic status.
3. They must have school board members turnover since the emergence of the opt-out movement in 2014 school board politics.

I selected four similar districts in order to identify patterns in politics and agenda-setting across the cases. It was also revealed that across the districts there were different politics and agenda setting dynamics in each case.
Data Collection and Analysis

Data sources, which are how I obtained findings to address my research questions that correspond with research question one, included *Newsday*, Facebook, documents such as district election-specific newsletters, local community newspapers, and research interviews. Interviews were, on average, 30 minutes to an hour in length. Interviews were conducted remotely, either through the Zoom virtual meeting space or by phone call. Interview format was dependent on the interviewee’s preference.

Interview questions were semi-structured. All interviewees were asked similar questions, but the questions were tailored to the interviewee and their involvement within the case. Questions were adjusted based on responses of the interviewees on a case-by-case basis. Interviews were recorded if interviewees granted permission to record. The recording device did not limit the close listening required by the interviewer of the interviewee (Yin, 2018). It was every intention that trust was formed between me as an interviewer and the interviewee. Therefore, the dissertation was offered to the interviewees to read after it is final and approved by the dissertation committee.

When deciding on individuals to interview from the selected school districts using the criteria laid out above, a one-phased approach was used. According to Yin (2018), limited documentation is needed in order to screen potential candidates to interview. On my part as the researcher, this was detailed in the form of position held in the district, years of service, and/or affiliations (i.e., with the Long Island Opt-Out Organization). These guidelines served as “operational criteria” to deem which district stakeholders would be best suited to interview.
The pool of interviewees consisted of individual actors who shared similar roles in each district. For example, if I interviewed the school board president for District 1, I strived to interview the school board president for District 2. I interviewed three actors for each of the four school districts, totaling twelve interviews. Roles of the interviewees included incumbent school board members, district administrative leaders, and district community members.

There were several methods of connecting with these potential candidates to interview. Social media platforms, especially Facebook, are the main influence tools of the Long Island Opt-Out Organization. As noted in chapter 2, a group page on Facebook was created to get messages out to followers and to share current events, candidate information, and changing educational policies. At first, it was intended to use this site to connect with leaders in their communities. However, the recommendations of Yin (2018) were not ignored when using social media sites. Facebook was not used in the interview process, only to seek out potential districts or actors within those districts to interview. It was not used as a platform for the interview process via chat feature (Yin, 2018).

Direct outreach to school districts via phone/email by using information provided on district websites was the leading way to make connections. School board members and district administration have emails on websites for public viewers to contact. School District Clerk’s also have contact information that was publicly available, which was a beneficial resource to have to seek out interview requests. I used this publicly available information to connect, discuss, and set up interview times. Interviewees themselves also were tools in gaining more individuals to interview, as they at times made suggestions and connections with others who expressed interest in being interviewed for this study.

Research Ethics
Yin (2018) recommends asking good questions and interpreting answers of respondents fairly. He says to be a good listener, and to not enter interviews with existing ideologies or preconceptions. He also advises staying adaptive, having a firm grasp of the issues being studied, and conducting research ethically. I pledged, as the researcher, to uphold these values of research as I conducted the data collection and case study analysis.

Confidentiality

When approaching interviews surrounding an ongoing political subject like the Opt-Out Movement, I as a researcher treaded lightly. I was not looking for stakeholders to sacrifice or threaten any political capital they have with their colleagues, administrators, school board members, and community members. In general terms, political capital is referred to the accumulation of resources that a political actor gathers throughout their leadership tenure. This could be in the form of governmental and political relationships with other leaders, voter connections that will result in votes for that leader, and policy actor influences (Casey, 2005). Compromising those accumulated features of political capital would not only affect the individual actor being interviewed, but the overall interview process of this study.

Therefore, as recommended by Yin (2018), interviewees were granted confidentiality. Their names and the names of their districts are not identified in the study. Confidentiality encouraged interviewees to be more open and franker in their responses. Those interviewed were asked to provide informed consent to me as the researcher, in order to participate in this case study analysis. School district names will be replaced with codifiers (e.g., “School District A”) throughout this research.
I used an analytical strategy to develop my own notes from the interviews (Yin, 2018). A matrix was created along the way to detail ongoing themes from each interview. A visual display in the form of a table was created as a compare and contrast mechanism for better understanding (see chapter 4 tables). Both allowed for “pattern matching” so that patterns were related to the “how’s” and “why’s” of this case study (Yin, 2018, p. 175). Individual district information was put in chronological order to detail a story of the Opt-Out Organization’s influence within each district politically and electorally and its apparent impact on agenda setting.

**Personal Disclaimer**

I would be remiss if I did not mention my own experience with the topic being discussed. In the spring of 2018, I was a challenger for a position on my local school district Board of Education. As a Long Island native, I ran for the board in the public school district I attended from K-12, the Farmingdale School District, located in Nassau County. While I came just shy of unseating an incumbent board member, I learned a lot from that experience. I was not too familiar with the Long Island Opt-Out Organization at the time but became familiar with the local district level organization through my campaign experience. While they did not officially endorse, I received much support from actors within based on my answers at the Meet the Candidates Night Forum. This experience and interaction sparked my interest in knowing more about the Long Island Opt-Out Movement and its overall impact on Long Island school elections and school agendas.

**Summary**

This case study involved four similar Long Island school districts. In order to gather relevant information to understand the dynamics of each of the four research questions,
structured interviews with open-ended question were conducted. A total of twelve individuals were interviewed, with three from each school district. Confidentiality was ensured to encourage frank responses from interviewees and to protect their political and leadership standing in their district and greater community, due to this political issue being studied. Throughout the research gathering process, data collection sources included Facebook, school district newsletters, Newsday, and local community newspapers, if recorded and publicly accessible. Once data was collected, I as the researcher compiled district details in several tables shown for discussion in the results chapter of this dissertation.
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

Introduction

As discussed in chapter 3, four Long Island school districts were selected for this study, according to the following criteria:

1. They must have consistent and similar rates of opt-out to each other over the last six years in both the ELA and mathematics state exams.
2. They must reflect similar community demographics to control for differences in socioeconomic status.
3. They must have school board member turnover since the emergence of the Opt-Out Movement in 2014 school board politics.

For each district, three experts on that district were interviewed, for a total of 12 interviewees. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and ranged from 30 minutes to 1 hour in length. This chapter begins with a description of the four districts and the interviewees. Second, opt-out rates are presented. Third, the research findings are presented for each research question.

The Four Districts

The four Long Island public school districts selected are representative of both Nassau and Suffolk Counties. They are largely White, middle to working class communities. While all four districts had moderate growth in minority demographics like Hispanic/Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Black/African American, those populations differ from district to district, but do not represent a majority of both the community and school district population.

Detailed below are the specific community demographics for each of the four districts. In accordance with research criterion number two, districts were carefully selected by community
demographics to control socioeconomic status. As detailed in chapter 2, research suggests that the Long Island Opt-Out Movement, as well as opt-out rates in general, are centered in more White, middle-class Long Island communities. Second, interviewee information for each school district is presented. Third, methods for electing board members are discussed. Information includes how long they have been serving on their respective Board of Education.

**School District A**

The first school district is “School District A.” School District A educates nearly 6,000 K-12 students. The district is 51% male, 49% female. White students make up 77% of the student population, followed by 10% Hispanic/Latino, 10% Asian/Pacific Islander, & 2% Black/African American (NYSED, 2021). The five members of the Board of Education serve for 3-year terms. Each member is elected by-seat. In a by-seat election, candidates run for a particular seat in the election against a certain incumbent or certain set of candidates. Whereas, in an at-large race, candidates elected are those that receive the most votes of all the candidates.

School District A interviewees are SDA Administrator and two members of the Board of Education, referenced as SDA BOE Member 1 and SDA BOE Member 2. All three interviewees have been in these positions for more than five years.

**School District B**

The second school district is “School District B.” School District B educates nearly 7,000 K-12 students. The district is 51% male, 49% female. White students make up 64% of the student population, followed by 22% Hispanic/Latino, 12% Asian/Pacific Islander, & 1% Black/African American (NYSED, 2021). The seven members of the Board of Education serve 3-year terms. Each member is elected at-large.
School District B interviewees are SDB Administrator and two members of the Board of Education, referenced as SDB BOE Member 1 and SDB BOE Member 2. All three interviewees have been in these positions for more than five years.

**School District C**

The third school district is “School District C.” School District C educates 5,000 K-12 students. The district is 52% male, 48% female. White students make up 81% of the student population, followed by 13% Hispanic/Latino, 3% Asian/Pacific Islander, & 1% Black/African American (NYSED, 2021). The seven members of the Board of Education serve 3-year terms. Each member is elected at-large.

School District C interviewees were SDC Administrator and two members of the Board of Education, referenced as SDC BOE Member 1 and SDC BOE Member 2. All three interviewees have been in these positions for more than three years.

**School District D**

The fourth school district interviewed is “School District D.” School District D educates 2,000 K-12 students. The district is 50% male, 50% female. White students make up 85% of the student population, followed by 8% Hispanic/Latino, 2% Asian/Pacific Islander, & 2% Black/African American (NYSED, 2021). The seven members of the Board of Education serve 3-year terms. Each member is elected by-seat.

School District D interviewees were SDD Administrator, a member of the Board of Education, referenced as SDD BOE Member 1, and a member of the School District Community, referenced as SDD Community Member. All three interviewees have been in these positions for more than five years.
Opt-Out Rates on State Assessments, 2014-2019

Tables 4.1 and 4.2 show opt-out rates for the four districts on both the math and ELA assessments from 2014 to 2019. These tables illuminate the justification to examine these districts in correspondence with research criterion number one.

Table 4.1: Public School District ELA Assessment Exam Opt-Out Rate, 2014-2019

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School District A</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School District B</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School District C</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School District D</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Diamond, 2017 & 2019)
Table 4.2: Public School District Math Assessment Exam Opt-Out Rate, 2014-2019

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School District A</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School District B</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School District C</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School District D</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Diamond, 2017 & 2019)

Note: “NR” means Not Reported. In 2014, the first-year school districts could report their opt-out numbers to Newsday, school districts A, B, C, and D did not disclose their numbers on the administered Math and ELA assessments.

Overall, School District A saw consistent increases in opt-out rates on both state assessments from 2014 to 2019. School District B saw large increases in the beginning of the Opt-Out Movement’s momentum but saw slight decline in test takers after 2017. School District C began in 2014 with strong opt-out numbers, but in recent years, saw their numbers steadily decline to over 50%, but not near the 60+% it once was showing. Lastly, School District D continues to the present day as an opt-out stronghold on Long Island, with students opting out of both assessments over 70% of the time year to year.

Research Tables on School District Competitive Election Overview

To satisfy research criterion number three, Table 4.3 details the competitive and non-competitive election cycles for each interviewed school district. Each district had a pattern of
contested elections, as well as school board member turnover. Between 2014 to 2019, school Districts A, C, and D have had one uncontested election for the Board of Education. School District B has seen two uncontested elections between 2014 to 2019. For by-seat districts A and D, races that were determined to be uncontested had no challengers at all in any election for a seat. If a district had one uncontested seat and another contested, they were classified as contested in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3 Public School District Election Information, 2014-2019

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School District A By seat</td>
<td>Contested</td>
<td>Uncontested</td>
<td>Contested</td>
<td>Contested</td>
<td>Contested</td>
<td>Contested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School District B At-Large</td>
<td>Contested</td>
<td>Contested</td>
<td>Contested</td>
<td>Uncontested</td>
<td>Contested</td>
<td>Uncontested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School District C At-Large</td>
<td>Contested</td>
<td>Contested</td>
<td>Contested</td>
<td>Contested</td>
<td>Contested</td>
<td>Uncontested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School District D By seat</td>
<td>Uncontested</td>
<td>Contested</td>
<td>Contested</td>
<td>Contested</td>
<td>Contested</td>
<td>Contested</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Newsday, 2014-2019

The next section of chapter 4 presents the findings for each research question.
Research Question #1

The first research question was: What were the most publicly discussed issues in each school board race? Within the course of the campaign, when and how did opt-out receive attention? Within the course of the campaign, when and how did Whole Child Theory receive attention?

Most Publicly Discussed Issues

There were several issues discussed across the four districts. Taxes were a popular issue every year. Year to year, districts have seen issues vary depending on societal occurrences. School safety, state testing of students, teacher evaluations, among other issues, come and go in their prominence depending on the current events or policies being enforced.

Taxes & Fiscal Responsibility

There was widespread agreement on the issues facing the respective school districts. All school district administrators, board members, and community members interviewed identified “taxes” as one of the leading issues of each school campaign season. SDA Administrator captured the essence of the most prevalent issue across all four-school districts examined. They said, “One issue is always the issue… taxes. If you are from Long Island, it probably goes back to the 1800’s that this has been a top issue. It’s always taxes... because we pay so much for what we get in return.”

SDA BOE Member 2 added, “No one wants to see their taxes go up. But we all want to be able to say we are proud of our schools and its services.” All school district administrators, board members, and community members interviewed discussed the New York State tax cap and its implications. While opinions of the tax cap were not communicated, the interviewees spoke
positively about the fact that their districts have stayed within the tax cap each year, and that their communities overwhelmingly support their budgets each year.

SDA BOE Member 1 said the main reason they ran for the school board was the Great Recession in 2009. There were cuts to programs and personnel in the district that concerned them as their child was in elementary school at the time. Similarly in School District D, both SDD Administrator and SDD BOE Member 1 discussed previous cuts due to low student enrollment which affected teacher employment that energized community members to either vocalize opposition to cuts or run for the board themselves.

School District B officials talked about taxes being a huge issue for voters. “Money is always a big issue… taxes. Taxes are huge in the county… they are very high” said SDB Administrator. SDB BOE Member 1 observed: “Money is going to continue being an issue as we continue to get more unfunded mandates. That’s a huge problem. That has been going on with testing, COVID, school security, whatever it may be. All have cost us quite a bit of money.”

Security

Security was a second issue that many of the interviewees identified as a much-discussed public issue. Security in this context refers to responses to school shootings at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018 and Sandy Hook Elementary in 2012. Whether the issue was armed security in the schools or more robust guest policies, this was a critical issue for several election cycles. In School District D, SDD Administrator said, “Security was a big one. When you had the tragedy at Parkland and Sandy Hook… that was a big one.” Security was also cited by SDC BOE Member 2 as the most predominant campaign issue in the 2018 election they contested.
**Transparency**

While perhaps the word “transparency” was not something each of the interviewees said specifically, there was a subtle undertone of the topic referenced across the interviews. When talking about this issue, SDA BOE Member 2 said that “a better word for it is communication. Communication from the district leadership, school board, and teachers directly to parents, students, and taxpayers.” Communication is a very broad item, but it was mentioned in all interviews.

Interviewees said that “communication” is a word they hear often, typically because there is deemed to be a lack of communication between stakeholders. Candidates running for the board, typically against incumbents or for open seats, cite lack of communication between the board and the community as reasons they run themselves. Parents at board meetings cite lack of communication between district officials on changes to school activities or programs. District officials and board members cite lack of communication from the government on expectations or new laws that districts must follow. Communication, or transparency, is an issue that the four districts have dealt with in campaigns over the years, and it is a topic that comes up in every cycle.

**Opt-Out, APPR, Parental Choice, & Testing**

Students are tested in grades 3 through 8 in ELA and math. As mentioned in chapter 2, opponents of these specific assessments expressed frustration on how they negatively affect their children both emotionally and physically. They also expressed their opposition to the tests being tied to educator performance.
Annual Professional Performance Review, commonly referred to as APPR, was legislation enacted in 2010 that tied teacher evaluations to student test scores from the state assessments (NYSUT, 2022). Because of this increased reliance on standardized testing as a way to evaluate teacher effectiveness, APPR became a campaign issue in the four districts. Opponents did not believe test scores were efficient ways to measure the value of a teacher or a school. SDC BOE Member 1 reflected that when words like “accountability” are mentioned, which APPR is a way to hold teachers accountable to their students’ performance, teachers “get nervous because they just want to know what it is and how it is going to be used.” Uncertainty about initial intentions behind APPR caused concern among teachers and teacher-supportive parents.

After APPR faced much backlash from teachers unions and parents, the NYS Board of Regents placed a moratorium on using grades 3-8 ELA and math assessments for APPR. Along with this move, was the decision to allow parents to opt their children out of state assessments. This policy change presented increased focus on the decision to opt students out and a parental choice to do so. These issues were prominent for several years due to the controversy surrounding the initial implementation of APPR and the political pressure for districts to openly support opt-out and/or parental choice.

The opt-out, APPR, parental choice, and testing issues in education converged on each other. All four complement one another, as the assessments present parents with the choice to have their child take or opt-out of the exams. SDD BOE Member 1 noted fierce opposition to Governor Cuomo's announcement of the state assessments and their relationship with APPR. They said:
With politics, Governor Cuomo at the time… he wanted to make sure he got more money [from the federal government] for education and wanted to make sure he was holding firm on educators. If educators were not doing what they had to do, he wanted to make sure there was a system in place to remove tenure.

SDD BOE Member 1 said APPR was Governor Cuomo’s way of scrutinizing teacher tenure if students did poorly on assessments.

State tests are discussed throughout the year. Mostly however, they are frequently of concern in the spring, when opt-out decisions are made by parents. In School District D, SDD BOE Member 1 knew there would be issues with parents early on. They said, “once you send out state tests with errors in them, you lose credibility,” noting that many exams had errors in them not noticed by NYS Education Department (NYSED) prior to administering them statewide. On the other hand, when SDA BOE Member 2 announced they were running for school board in the late winter, the first question they were asked by concerned voters was “what are your opinions on state testing mandates?”

SDB Administrator provided their overview of the rise of standards-based tests as an issue across Long Island schools:

*A Nation at Risk* first started this, and it was spurious data. When they were comparing the U.S. to other countries and saying the U.S. was lacking… the United States makes an effort and really mandates that children get a free and appropriate education until they’re 21 years old. Other countries don’t do that. So, you are seeing the gen-ed student that’s in America being tested against kids who would amount to only your college bound students- or your very high-end
students [in other countries]. And of course, that wasn’t going to be right. So, I
think that’s what started it, and then everything came as a backlash to that. There
was a lot more effort on standards-based testing.”

SDB Administrator also discussed the role of APPR:

APPR came in at the same time and everything got conflated. You had elementary
school teachers, who were doing a fine job, but for the first time they were asked
to have their students take a test to show what they learned. High school teachers
had the Regents exam. So, they were kind of used to it. But now this made it for
elementary school teachers. Then on top of it, they made the Common Core
curriculum. So, everything got conflated. APPR, standards-based testing, the
whole APPR piece where teachers received a score based on how well their
students did. And it was a mess.

SDB Administrator shared a story about their experience talking with the 2011-2015 New York
State Education Commissioner, John King:

I remember being a new superintendent in the second year of the whole
implementation of APPR. The Commissioner of Education meets the new
superintendents in the fall… and it was John King. I said to him ‘you know, this is
not going away’ and he responded ‘yea, it’s going to fizzle out.’ I responded, ‘Dr.
King, I’m telling you right now this is not going to fizzle out and these people are
not going to send their kids to take the test… what you are trying to do is just a
waste of money and a waste of time. There needs to be a moratorium or somehow
let the curriculum catch up with what we’re trying to do.’
SDC BOE Member 1, who also had experience as a school administrator, also had discussions with John King. They reflected:

The Superintendents were pretty much at war with the Commissioner of Education... John King. Because all of a sudden, we had all these testing pieces attached to teacher evaluations and attached to administrator evaluations. We had no data. Plus, the superintendents and to a large degree NYSSBA [NYS School Boards Association] weren’t invited into the conversation. That was a major issue for us, and we thought we had something to say. And of course, we were paying millions of dollars to Pearson [testing company] at the time and we had no data into its reliability and how these assessments were drawn. Of course, there were so many mistakes, and it didn’t help the process.

Adding their own thoughts as a career educator on the rollout of APPR and standardized tests as growing issues in school districts, SDB Administrator said:

It just was so poorly rolled out that it could not possibly succeed. Then, the legislation that said, you don’t have to take the test... nothing is going to happen to your child if they don’t take the test, resulted in parents not having their children take the test. But the school was put under scrutiny because of the participation rate so everything about it was done poorly.

SDB BOE Member 1 had experience as a school principal and shared the following about APPR:

I do not think that this testing issue would have become a big issue if it wasn’t tied to APPR. We had the testing in 4th and 8th grades for years and it was never a
big deal. And we could use the data because you can extrapolate information by pushing a button about your special ed population, your latchkey kids, your different race of kids, and different incomes of families. You can get a true picture of where you needed to work and then bring programs in to match that exact deficit. So, I think there was a lot of harm done by not having these tests. We didn’t use the data to say to a teacher “haha we got you!” We used that data to give us more information to make our programs much more prescriptive to get the kids, especially in the subgroups who were not doing well, what they needed.

SDC Administrator provided their perspective on the emergence of opt-out, parental choice, and educator support rising as political issues across the Long Island region, and especially in School District C:

The grand plan was a p-16, a pre-k through 16 view, whereby in a perfect world, whatever that means, the assessments would be given to students. Those assessments would then provide insight and data on the effectiveness of the teachers. That would then translate to how well teacher prep programs would demonstrate their effectiveness as well.

SDC Administrator explained that when districts followed NYSED guidelines to make the standards and tests more challenging, student scores dropped. Parents and teachers became angry:

People’s children went from level three or level four and now a level two or three and were saying ‘what gives?’ Then when they tied it to APPR that is when really there was a lot of resistance. This certainly was a complex issue, but it unfairly
put the onus on teachers. That voice came out, in unity, loud and clear about the shortcomings of this entire process.

SDC BOE Member 1 emphasized socioeconomic differences and test performance:

If you got a good zip code you’re going to do relatively well on the assessment. Does that mean you’re a better school district than the one who has lower socioeconomic indicators or demographics? I find that to be very troubling.

In School District D, the opt-out issue has been prominent annually. According to SDD Administrator, state tests are “not something confrontational as we saw and see in other communities. For us, it’s more about the option. So, we’ve been hovering around the 70% opt-out mark for years on both tests. The issue comes up at board meetings here and there.”

SDD BOE Member 1 also noted that, starting in 2014, opt-out decisions “came up in board meetings.” At the time, District D was working on how to communicate with the community regarding the tests and how the district could best utilize test data. SDD BOE Member 1 recalled:

There were a couple of letters shown to the board by parents and the attorneys at the time that said you couldn’t send home a letter saying ‘for numbers purposes’ we wanted to have an exact understanding of how many students would take the tests. But, the following year, the same law firm said ‘with everything happening in education’ you are allowed to send home a letter stating your interests in preparing for the numbers.
Opt-out became a popular way for parents to show their solidarity with teachers during the initial APPR years, and/or to uphold their views on standardized testing. According to SDD Administrator, there were concerns about the social and emotional impacts of testing on students.

The real big issue was the rollout... it was all at once. From an education standpoint, there is a lot of good to the Common Core but the way it was rolled out… it caused a lot of angst. With that, people talked about the social and emotional piece. You had students who were following the normal standards and then all of a sudden, they had to switch gears. You had a 5th or 8th grader who had been learning under certain standards for several years, and then they have the Common Core for a year or two, and now they are asked to take a test.

SDD Administrator said APPR added to the concerns:

Now we are going to associate test scores with teachers and now you are asking kids who have not been exposed to the Common Core since Kindergarten to do this. If they rolled out Common Core in Kindergarten and then first grade... I don’t think they would have had these issues.

SDD Administrator also highlighted the roles of politics and money:

A lot of it was politics. This was all tied to money… Common Core. The state was getting a ton of money to do this. And we jumped on it as a state and then they were pushed to roll it out. Most educators would tell you that they were ok with the Common Core, but not with the rollout.

In School District D, opt-out is not a popular issue that is addressed in school elections due to the overwhelming community support for the option.
Generally speaking, school board candidates have tended to support the decision to opt-out in School District D. When asked why this seems to be a trend, SDD BOE Member 1 emphasized:

Most of our town is made up of teachers, cops, and many in the public service area. When you have a community full of educators, obviously they are in the know about what goes on. Whether they like the state testing or not, they kind of know [about education issues] and already made their choice. I don’t know what can be said to change their minds because they’re already in education and they have their philosophy.

**Whole Child Theory**

Across the four districts, the Whole Child Theory was not a prominent issue in school board campaigns from 2014 to 2019. The curriculum reform endorsed by the Long Island Opt-Out group was most prevalent in School District A because of Opt-Out endorsed candidates who became board members and tried to get Whole Child Theory reform on to the board agenda. That was not similarly seen in School Districts B, C, and D. As a campaign issue, Whole Child Theory was not a prominent issue in districts B, C, and D. It is hard to gauge if the Whole Child Theory was a key factor in School District A board elections, or if it was primarily opt-out that drove the success of Opt-Out candidates.

All school districts interviewed saw school board candidates endorsed by the Long Island Opt-Out Organization go on to win terms. Interviewees in all four districts reported that elements of the Whole Child Theory were being implemented in different ways that they presume caused voters to pay more attention to the assessments and the choice to opt-out, rather than the policy
proposals to replace assessments. These matters are discussed more fully in the research question four section of this chapter.

**Other Issues Pertinent in One or More Districts**

In each of the four school districts, there were unique issues pertaining to the individual districts that were prominent in the 2014-2019 election cycle.

In School District A, there was a land issue in the district that was also prominent in the late 1990’s. The district owned a large piece of land and was tasked with its maintenance and security. The ownership of the land was controversial in the community as some saw it as a “money pit” that should be sold versus others who saw it is a resource the district could utilize. SDA BOE Members 1 and 2 mentioned that this land issue continued to hold interest among voters at times between 2014 and 2019 because of the budget and maintenance concerns that came with it and had lasting effects on the district and greater community.

In School District B, there were concerns over proposed cuts to special education programs and services. SDB BOE member 2 noted “an issue with space.” School District B had to hold a bond referendum to add classrooms and relocate a school building cafeteria. The board had to go into the community and “push the bond.”

SDB BOE Member 2 also talked about revitalization of athletics fields as a controversial issue in the district over the years:

We redid our football fields and tracks. We made our fields… the turf… multipurpose, that went over big in the community. We got lighted fields. Nice bleachers. It’s like a Division II college setup. It’s really nice and we did a nice job. That actually appeased some people, and others got pissed off because we
didn’t do anything for the music people or these other people, so it’s tough making everybody happy with regards to the board.

In School District C, there were building and grounds ballot measures that may have brought voters out to the polls. According to SDC BOE Member 2, many community members supported the ballot items. Both SDC Administrator and SDC BOE Member 2 mentioned issues involving the district and the Long Island Power Authority, “LIPA.” According to SDC Administrator, “a power plant in the district pays about 34% of the district tax levy.” SDC Administrator noted litigation with the plant, mediations that occurred, and large community interest in the developments between the district and the power authority. While the case has been settled, the tax levy issue generated a lot of concern and interest to voters in the district.

In School District D there were concerns over “grade clustering” one year. This proposal would allow elementary schools, which normally hold grades K through 5, to change to grades K through 3 or grades 3 through 5 in order to reduce class sizes and teaching staff. “Grade clustering” was not adopted in this district after much community backlash.

**School Board Seat Capacity**

In both School Districts A and C, the issue of the number of seats that each school district had on their Board of Education came up in specific cycles. In School District A, a ballot proposition would raise the number of board seats from five to seven. The ballot measure failed. SDA BOE Member 1 noted:

That drew an enormous crowd… typically we get about 7% to 9% of voter participation. That year it nearly doubled; probably 14-15% of voters turned out.
School board size was also an issue in School District C in 2015. A referendum to change the board from nine to seven seats created much community interest, similar to School District A, and also saw increased voter participation that year. However, in this case, the ballot measure passed.

**Summary of Research Question 1 Findings**

Taxes, fiscal responsibility, school security, transparency/communication, opt-out, APPR, parental choice and testing were popular campaign topics from 2014 to 2019 in the four districts. Whole Child Theory, while discussed in districts between 2014-2019, was not a leading campaign issue or concern of most voters.

School districts had their own unique campaign issues discussed between 2014-2019. School District A had maintenance and security concerns regarding land the district owned and a ballot measure issue to increase the number of board seats. School District B had proposed cuts to special education programs, a bond issue surrounding school building classrooms and cafeteria, as well as revamping athletic fields. School District C had a building and grounds issue, legal issues with a local power authority, as well as a ballot measure to reduce the size of the school board. Lastly, in School District D, they had grade clustering proposals to reduce class sizes and teaching staff.
Research Question #2:

The second research question was: Were there any policy entrepreneurs in the four districts focused on opt-out and Whole Child Theory during 2014-2019? If so, when and where? What were their positions and activities? How do they fit the definition of a policy entrepreneur?

As discussed in chapter 2, policy entrepreneurs are actors who use their knowledge to further their policy agendas. They “wait in and around government with their solutions at hand, waiting for problems to float by to which they can attach their solutions, waiting for a development in the political stream they can use to their advantage...” (Kingdon, 2011, p. 165). These actors may be politicians, leaders of interest groups, or unofficial spokespeople for particular causes. They are people with substantial knowledge, power, and determination on an issue to take advantage of a window of opportunity to see their agendas advance.

Across the Four Districts: Teachers Unions as Policy Entrepreneurs

In all four districts, the same policy entrepreneurs were identified. All interviewees agreed that the local teachers union played large roles in the political and policy agendas of their districts during 2014-2019. Teachers unions are made up of people; they have elected leadership who are district educators that are chosen from union members to lead them and advocate their interests to district administration and school board members.

Teachers unions are policy actors when it comes to advocating for their contracts that are in discussion among the board, as well as items that address the needs of their members such as benefits, safety, and possible disciplinary items, to name a few. Teacher unions, whose funding is largely supported by individual dues from members through their own pockets, have endorsed and invested in particular candidates for the school boards in their respective districts. They have
dedicated time to phone banking and stuffing mailers to voters in support of their candidates. They take political risk by endorsing candidates for the board, with the risk of that candidate losing to the challenger who was not endorsed and possibly setting a tone of discord. Investing substantial time, energy, and taking risks are the definition of a policy entrepreneur, which teachers unions are.

Lastly, policy entrepreneurs advocate and champion issues. Across the four districts, common positions on the issues were held. Teachers unions supported opt-out, opposed Common Core measures, opposed APPR, and often backed candidates who were also backed by the Long Island Opt-Out Organization.

**School District A**

Interviewees in School District A indicated that the teachers unions' influence in school board elections varied across 2014-2019. Both SDA BOE Member 1 and 2 reported that candidates endorsed by the teachers union had about a 50% chance of winning. SDA Administrator explained some of the variation, when opt-out and APPR were largely opposed among district voters, the candidates endorsed by the teachers union won regularly. However, there were times in School District A during years where teachers were being laid off due to budget cuts or enrollment was declining, teacher backed candidates lost in the district.

SDA Administrator noted that teacher union support fluctuated according to the local economic conditions:

Teachers make a lot of money here. When things are good, voters tend to back the teacher’s union candidates. When money is tough and things are hard, the community tends to back away from teacher backed candidates.
On the rise of the teachers union as a policy entrepreneur in the district, SDA BOE Member 2 said that the union has increasingly become more relevant year to year. The union in the district has invested time and energy advocating for certain issues in the district. Accordingly, SDA BOE Member 2 has been supported by the teachers union in School District B, where they provided financial support, as well as supportive emails and flyers to voters. They also conducted phone banks calling district voters in support of SDA BOE Member 2. NYSUT (New York State United Teachers), a statewide teachers union, also involved themselves in the election supporting SDA BOE Member 2 in both campaigns they ran in.

School District B

In School District B, SDB BOE Member 1 has been endorsed by the union each time they ran in a contested election. Notably, this was despite SDB BOE Member 1’s position of not supporting opt-out, further discussed later in this chapter. However, all Opt-Out candidates who won election were also endorsed by the teachers union in the district. SDB Administrator observed, “the Opt-Out Movement in the district would not have gained its popularity without the support of the teachers.”

SDB BOE Member 2 also was endorsed by the teachers union each time they ran. Their resume includes prominent public sector union work, which they believe elevated their standings with the school district teachers union.

SDB BOE Member 2 recalled investing substantial time into union negotiations:

I have very good relationships with the teachers union… they were in negotiations one year and myself and another board member sat through three nights of negotiations with lawyers from our side [the board] and lawyers from the teachers
union to try and resolve the contract, which we did. That carried a lot of weight with the teachers union that we gave up time. I would go straight from work three nights in a row. I have never had a problem getting endorsed by them.

Because of this relationship with the teachers union in the district, SDB BOE Member 2 explained that they have become a bridge between the union, other board members, and at times, candidates for open seats:

I am usually the [person] that, when the board members are running and they want to get endorsed by the union... they usually come to me because I got the ins with the unions. I usually talk on their behalf to get them support from the unions. Some people go for [union support]... the ones that opted not to go for it, not too many have won elections.

SDB BOE Member 2 acknowledged the union has in the past endorsed challengers, but mostly endorsed incumbents; “the union has endorsed challengers. Over the years, challengers have defeated incumbents with the backing of the teacher’s union.” When asked about the likelihood of a candidate winning with teacher’s union support, SDB BOE Member 2 said:

It’s pretty high. At least 85% likely. They carry a lot of weight here. Between them and the PTA, or any of the unions, you stand a pretty good chance of being elected if they support you.

This interviewee also pointed to second key factor in board elections:

Athletics also plays a large role. Involvement in youth athletic associations leverage you in the community. Because the students know you and then the parents recognize you.
It is important to note that SDB Administrator emphasized that School District B’s teachers union was a strong advocate of opt-out and supported the Opt-Out Organization on Long Island. SDB Administrator raised concerns about political advocacy on the part of School District B teachers:

We had a teacher who was very involved in the Opt-Out Movement. We had so many pro-movement rallies throughout Long Island over the years. The teacher was slated to be a speaker at a rally, and I cautioned them not to state the district they work for [when] encouraging opt-out to parents. They had every right to speak, but not to note that they are our district’s teacher [when] encouraging opt-out. But they did anyway. I ended up calling them in and told them they can’t do that... we uphold an oath. But to this day, our teachers support it.

School District C

SDC Administrator, and SDC BOE Members 1 and 2 agreed there was an active and politically powerful teachers union in School District C. When asked about the union role in school politics, and specifically opt-out advocacy, SDC Administrator pointed to union advocacy and a large number of educators residing in the district:

The main argument against opt-out had to do with the sentiment of parents saying, “I don’t want you harming my child’s teacher.” That was one sentiment out there. There was a concerted effort in the district and especially throughout the Long Island region by NYSUT that they were not in favor of this. That permeated throughout our community. We have a large number of educators that live in the district, who may teach in our schools or teach in neighboring districts, so there
was a great deal of awareness of the concerns relative of the Opt-Out Movement and the impact on teachers. There was also a crowd who believed it was just too much of an overreach.

SDC BOE Member 2 agreed:

We have a lot of educators that live in the district, and they can mobilize. It is not insurmountable for candidates not endorsed by them to win, but it is certainly uphill not to have their endorsement. They buy lawn signs, and they send out mailers to all teachers in the district on your behalf.

SDC BOE Member 1 and 2 were endorsed by the teachers union. SDC BOE Member 2 noted that there is a “90 percent” likelihood of a union backed candidate winning in the district (Most, but not all board members were endorsed by the teachers union).

The question of the Opt-Out Organization and its influence in School District C brought out an interesting pattern. SDC BOE Member 2 pointed out that the teachers union and Long Island Opt-Out endorsements go “hand-in-hand.” They said, “anyone who was endorsed by Opt-Out, I believe, was also endorsed by the teachers union.” SDC Administrator noted that it is “part of the overall package” that a candidate must be supportive of opt-out and have their support as a declared position in their election to receive the teachers union endorsement.

School District D

School District D’s teachers unions influence and involve themselves in district politics and policy, fulfilling the meaning of a policy entrepreneur. Noted by SDD Administrator, the traditional winners in the districts elections are “usually people who have some type of backing within the community. Those that have support from the unions.”
SDD Community Member mentioned that the teachers union was highly supportive of opt-out and the Opt-Out Organization. They spent money “PR wise” on billboard vans, newsletters, fact sheets, and got out in the community. They believe the union has a large influence over the community. School District D is home to many union members. Additionally, SDD BOE Member 1 said they “always heard from teachers that we were not getting the [student test] scores back fast enough” from NYSED. Testing and APPR were two leading issues behind union support for opt-out [decision making].

SDD Administrator also commented on the lack of timely test data from NYSED: “We were being told the scores would drive instruction… and we wouldn’t get scores until October of the following year [from when the tests were administered]. How do you do that when you are halfway through the year?”

On a final note, SDD BOE Member 1 brought up the influence of CSEA, the Civil Servants Employees Association, as an interest group in the district. Since the CSEA union has made endorsements of candidates in the past and has tried to influence both policy and politics in the district, they are characterized as an interest group. Because they are not investing, continuously, time and energy like the teachers union does in the district, they do not fit the definition of a policy entrepreneur.

Differences

While teachers unions are the only actors that meet the elements of what it means to be a policy entrepreneur across the four districts, there have been interest groups that have participated in school district politics in the past. Interviewees from two districts, A and B, identified individual members of their community who invested substantial time, energy, and
resources into promoting the opt-out decision and Whole Child Theory. School District A and B interviewees identified individual parents and individual teachers being prominent in school district politics.

**School District A**

School District A saw the most local advocacy in the community in favor of the Opt-Out Movement and Whole Child Theory. SDA Administrator said there was an “anti-APPR group” in the community that were “mom and pop.” When asked if there were particularly loud voices on the subjects, SDA Administrator replied “oh God yeah” with a chuckle. “While it is waning currently, there were loud community members attending board meetings, speaking during public comment, have a presence on social media, and some elected on the Board of Education.”

SDA BOE Member 1 identified another key political actor in the district, the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA). Similar to concerns of SDB Administrator about teachers being active in politics in School District B, SDA BOE Member 1 reported some improper political advocacy by the PTA in School District A:

At one point, the only leading body in the community that was interested in endorsing was the PTA. They were told to stop endorsing candidates... they can support the budget but as a non-political entity they could not [endorse candidates]. They could as individuals but not as an organization. You would see PTA members out there on election day handing out flyers over the years saying the PTA supports X candidate, but that wasn’t right. They have the right to support as individual voters, but not as a PTA.
SDA BOE Member 2 discussed how the School District A PTA has lost much influence in the politics of the district over the years:

I can tell you twenty years ago it was absolutely the only way that you got a ticket onto the board was through the PTA. The PTA unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on the way you look at it, it doesn’t have as much influence in many areas as they used to. I think that has to do with a lot of the changing demographics in the district. In the past, we had a lot of one-working-parent households. Moms were generally in the PTA, and they had hundreds of members attend meetings and events. Now, at their meetings if they have 15 to 20 members that show up to a meeting on a Thursday night that’s a lot. Overall, the PTA has declined and so has their influence.

School District B

As discussed under Research Question 1, tax issues were prominent in all four districts. School District B saw candidates endorsed by local interest groups who called themselves “the Tax Pack.” They were an organized political coalition that sought to get candidates for the Board of Education as single-issue candidates. SDB Administrator noted that one candidate, continues to be a popular figure in the community due to their “hold the line on taxes” advocacy. SDB Administrator reflected,

“Tax Packers” ran in 2008/2009. They were really asking for a lot of information on how we spend money. We are really transparent here. We put all of our financials on our website. It’s always an issue in our county…. There are more people that don’t have children in our school district than do. You have a lot of
senior citizens and [others] with their children out of school, but you have to prove to our community that investment in our schools is a good idea. Because, when they go to sell their houses, which are probably going to be sooner rather than later, their home values will be good [due to well-funded, good schools].

**Summary of Research Question 2 Findings**

Teachers unions are policy entrepreneurs across the four districts. They invest substantial time and energy into pursuing their interests and into the candidates they endorse for the school board. They operate phone banks, stuff and send campaign mailers to NYSUT members in their districts, and work closely with board members to advocate for their interests.

In some districts, the CSEA union has been an interest group that works to influence school elections by endorsing candidates. Also at times, districts have had interest groups come and go as issues were important to voters. These would include issues surrounding APPR and taxes.

A key pattern found in research question 2 analysis was across School Districts A and B. The districts had ethical questions rise at points in time where they had to grapple with holding up ethical standards. School District A had an issue with the PTA making endorsements of school board candidates, as a non-profit and non-political entity. School District B had teachers attending deemed political rallies sponsored by the Long Island Opt-Out Organization openly citing the district they work in and encouraging parents to opt their children out of state mandated exams. While these were two different questions of ethics, both districts had to overcome these ethical challenges.
**Research Question #3:**

The third research question was: Among the school board candidates, what were their declared positions on opt-out and Whole Child Theory? What were the 2014-2019 election results for each category (a b c below)?

a. Incumbents

b. Challengers

c. Open Seat Candidates

**Election Tables, 2014-2019**

Table 4.4 details the school board elections for School Districts A, B, C, and D from 2014 to 2019. Noted within are re-election of incumbents, defeats of incumbents, challenger wins over incumbents, and open seat candidates.
Table 4.4: Selected School District Elections, 2014-2019

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<td>By Seat</td>
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<td>Seat 1: Incumbent beat challenger</td>
<td>Open seat</td>
<td>Seat 1: Incumbent defeated challenger</td>
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<td>Seat 2: Incumbent beat challenger</td>
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<td>School District B</td>
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<td>At-Large</td>
<td>Two incumbents re-elected.</td>
<td>One incumbent re-elected.</td>
<td>Two incumbents re-elected.</td>
<td>Three incumbents unopposed for re-election.</td>
<td>Two incumbents re-elected over challenger.</td>
<td>Two incumbents unopposed for re-election.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>One challenger elected.</td>
<td>One challenger defeated incumbent.</td>
<td>One challenger elected over two others.</td>
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<td>One incumbent &amp; one challenger defeated.</td>
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<td>School District C At-Large</td>
<td>One incumbent re-elected.</td>
<td>Two challengers elected.</td>
<td>One incumbent re-elected.</td>
<td>Two incumbents re-elected.</td>
<td>One challenger elected.</td>
<td>One incumbent and one other challenger defeated.</td>
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Source: *Newsday, 2014-2019*

Table 4.5 shows Opt-Out endorsed and Whole Child Theory supportive candidates in School Districts A, B, C, and D from 2014 to 2019. Also highlighted is their success at the polls.
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<td>School District D</td>
<td>No Endorsement</td>
<td>One Opt-Out candidate won over incumbent. Opt-Out candidate one open seat.</td>
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Source: *Newsday, 2014-2019*

**Similarities in Candidate Positions**

Generally, across the board, incumbents fared well over challengers in the four districts. Interestingly, however, all four school districts saw an incumbent lose to an Opt-Out endorsed challenger or an Opt-Out challenger win an open seat. The 2016 election cycle saw the largest electoral success among Opt-Out endorsed candidates across the four districts.

**School District A**

According to School District A interviews, Opt-Out endorsed and Whole Child Theory advocates generally did well in district elections. But it took a specific platform to win. SDA BOE Member 2 emphasized:

> [Candidates] who won had the Whole Child approach that wasn’t to the extreme...

> We had some candidates... that were very anti-education as a whole but more wanting to provide a playground like opportunity or social atmosphere for students at the primary responsibility of the school... They had very small success rates. Zero success. Marginal amounts of votes.
SDA BOE Member 2 explained that School District A voters supported Opt-Out because of the encouragement of parental choice. However, Whole Child Theory was more complicated: “Once you tell a parent in the district you have to do one thing or the other, it’s an extreme.”

The 2016 and 2017 election cycles were the most successful contests for Opt-Out candidates in School District A. In 2016, an Opt-Out endorsed candidate secured an open seat. This candidate was especially vocal in support of opt-out, against APPR, and for Whole Child education being implemented in the schools. The candidate also received support from the teachers union.

In 2017, a School District A incumbent was defeated by an Opt-Out endorsed challenger. The incumbent, whom SDA BOE Member 2 cited as “anti-teacher,” lost to a Kindergarten teacher who was Opt-Out backed. The victorious challenger was also a key ally of the 2016 cycle Opt-Out victor mentioned above. Both the 2016 and 2017 Opt-Out winners cited would often be “on the same page” during board meetings as SDA BOE Member 1 cited. The board member also said that opt-out “definitely” played a role in the success of the challenger over the incumbent in 2017:

It was strong Opt-Out and strong teacher backing that provided the win for the challenger. The incumbent... was anti-opt-out. [The incumbent] didn’t like [Opt-Out] tactics, or the way [Opt-Out] presented themselves. [The incumbent] ran a very negative campaign. They were also not favored by the teachers union because they got themselves involved in things a board member should not get involved in.
The incumbent board member who was defeated in 2017 had personal conflicts with several teachers in the district, which resulted in poor relations throughout the incumbent's tenure with the teachers union. SDA BOE Member 2 also cited that social media, specifically Facebook, where the Opt-Out Organization has a large following, played a large role in the election to help the challenger to victory.

The 2017 election in School District A also saw an open seat won by an Opt-Out endorsed candidate, SDA BOE Member 2, who is a lifelong public-school educator. They were for the opt-out decision and for Whole Child reforms as a candidate and on the board:

Being in the field of education, I have seen a lot of [testing] firsthand. I was able to utilize firsthand instances to promote Whole Child learning on the board. As well as anecdotal details of situations that happened in my own classroom; kids being able to rise up to the challenge at the desk or kids completely break down and cry because of the difficulty of the test or the way it was made up. The high stakes portion on it for teachers, like myself, to have my teaching ratings based on or evaluated on how my students randomly did on a three-day test was much of an issue.

SDA BOE Member 1 discussed the 2017 candidates that were both educators who won seats:

[The candidate that won the open seat] is an educator, as was the other candidate for the other seat who defeated the incumbent. [The open seat candidate] ran against a very popular candidate in the community... they had strong PTA support.
While the open-seat candidate did not have PTA support, they were endorsed by the teachers union and Opt-Out. The election was deemed “an upset” by SDA BOE Member 1. In this open seat race, a candidate endorsed by the teachers union and Opt-Out defeated a PTA affiliated candidate, showing the waning influence of the PTA in the district, as well as the increased political influence Opt-Out and the teachers union had in district elections in 2017.

In 2019, the 2016 Opt-Out victor ran again with the Opt-Out endorsement, though they had left the role of board member a year prior. In this election, the teachers union and Opt-Out endorsed candidate was not successful in defeating an incumbent board member. While the incumbent was not endorsed by Long Island Opt-Out or the teachers union, they were known to be supportive of parental choice and the value of Whole Child reform efforts. An Opt-Out endorsed and Whole Child Theory supportive candidate did not win in 2019, due to perceived issues surrounding them from past school community experiences not further elaborated by SDA BOE Member 1.

Overall, SDA BOE Member 2 believes Opt-Out endorsed candidates in the district made it to the school board because of Opt-Out support. Opt-Out support allowed candidates to secure two open seats and defeat an incumbent in two different election cycles in School District A. Both SDA Administrator and SDA BOE Member 2 said that for candidates running in the past, whether as an incumbent, for an open seat, or against an incumbent, would be “dead in the water” if they were against opting-out of the tests.

*School District B*

In School District B, incumbents have been stable on the board, having generally been re-elected from year to year. However, there have been election cycles where incumbents were
defeated by Opt-Out and Whole Child Theory supportive candidates or open seats were won by candidates. Three current board members in the district, all of whom have run in different election cycles, have been endorsed by the Long Island Opt-Out Organization.

The Opt-Out Organization influenced campaign activity in School District B elections between 2015 and 2019. An Opt-Out Organization endorsed candidate has won every election in School District B since 2015. SDB BOE Member 2 said that Opt-Out candidates fared well in elections during this time period: “The [candidates] that were involved in the Opt-Out Movement... they did better election wise.... it made a difference in their campaigns.”

In 2015, an Opt-Out candidate defeated an incumbent. In that election, the opt-out decision and testing were big issues in the community. According to the interviewees, the incumbent was “weak” who didn’t touch upon the opt-out and Whole Child issue. They, therefore, found themselves unseated by a strong Opt-Out challenger. The incumbent “ran on a single issue and was supplanted by someone who ran on Opt-Out and was endorsed by them” said SDB Administrator. SDB BOE Member 2 said the incumbent was strong on budgetary issues and tax items but was not friendly towards teachers. This resulted in their failure to secure the teachers union endorsement, in addition to not having Long Island Opt-Out support. The challenger that defeated the incumbent in 2015, remains on the Board of Education to the present day. They have continued to receive Opt-Out Organization support in their additional campaigns.

In 2016, there were three seats open for the Board of Education. Although the cycle typically only has two seats open, there was another seat vacated mid-term. The third highest vote getter received the third spot, but not a full three-year term. They would have to run two years later. In this election, the highest vote getter, SDB BOE Member 1, was anti-opt. As a former educator and administrator at the elementary level, they said they were well versed in the
logistics and understandings of the process. They stated, “I am not an opt-outer. I believe kids need to follow the rules whether you agree with them or not. You need to make the best of any situation.” When asked about why they oppose the opt-out decision and overall Opt-Out Movement on Long Island, SDB BOE Member 1 believes,

A lot of [test opposition] is due to parents who are lazy who didn’t believe in pushing their kids, challenging their kids, and giving their kids the easy way out so they didn’t have to deal with [the tests].

While SDB BOE Member 1 was not supportive of opt-out and has subsequently not been endorsed by the Opt-Out Organization, they are a supporter of Whole Child Theory:

I absolutely support the Whole Child Theory. My background has its history in that. Many people and many schools were doing this way before… you can go back to the early 2000s or 1990s, that this really showed up and it was paramount. They said when it came on the scene [in School District B] that this was a novel subject... it wasn’t.

With SDB BOE Member 1’s re-election secured in the 2016 election, the second seat went to an Opt-Out endorsed challenger. The challenger, also an educator, ran on a platform advocating for Whole Child reforms as well as anti-State testing. This forced an incumbent member to take the third seat and who had to run again two years later.

In 2017, 2018, and 2019, the Long Island Opt-Out organization was left with incumbent School District B board members to endorse. Most incumbents, who generally do well in School District B, found themselves with teacher’s union, Opt-Out, and wide community support which, according to SDB BOE Member 2, is a perfect combination to secure a win.
SDB BOE Member 2 was not an original supporter of opt-out and Whole Child Theory. Over the years, as they came to know fellow board members who were supportive, they gradually moved towards these declared positions as a candidate. Reflecting on their gradual move toward a supportive position on opt-out, SDB BOE Member 2 said:

I had a problem with opt-out originally because there were state aid formulas involved in it... State aid doesn’t take precedent over the kids, and they are getting physically sick to their stomach because they are stressed out about taking a stupid test... then my priority is to help these kids out. That’s why I got supportive of the Opt-Out Movement.

As SDB BOE Member 2 took time to reflect and understand more about the opt-out topic, they said they became more supportive of the decision and understood the concern parents in their district were having:

I finally realized after speaking with [opt-out and Whole Child supportive] people and going to their meetings, that these tests that they are given these kids from third to eighth grade are totally useless. You are stressing out these poor elementary kids... I have seen kids actually going into the school crying because they are so stressed about these standardized tests that don’t mean anything.

There is no record, per the Long Island Opt-Out Organizations previous endorsements in School District B, that they endorsed SDB BOE Member 2 in any election they contested. However, that does not suggest that SDB BOE Member 2 was not supported by local Opt-Out supportive parents. The Long Island Opt-Out Organization is a regional organization covering both Nassau and Suffolk counties. There are also local, community-based chapters made up of concerned
parents and community members. What is suggested is the local organization at the district level supported SDB BOE Member 2 in the 2018 election, as they did with one of their own opt-out supportive incumbents who was running as a team with SDB BOE Member 2. SDB BOE Member 2’s running mate, however, was endorsed by Long Island Opt-Out in the 2018 election they ran in together.

School District C

When speaking to all three district interviewees, they all cited they have seen candidates pop up in the district on niche issues, like opt-out as an example. SDC Administrator cited candidates typically coming from “PTA’s, people who had other connections and relationships with athletics, religions” running for the school board in School District C.

SDC Administrator spoke at length about their recollection of the 2015 School District C elections as it was their first one with the district: “The year that I was coming in, the election was happening... there was like seven candidates. The President of the Board lost re-election.” In further conversation, SDC Administrator does not believe the Board President lost “solely” on opt-out, but the Board President had issues with the teacher’s union, who did not endorse the Board President for re-election. The Board President lost to three candidates, in the at-large election system, who were endorsed by the teachers union.

The 2016 election was the strongest cycle for the Opt-Out Organization in School District C. Two Opt-Out endorsed candidates were elected, with one incumbent defeated in the election. The incumbent board member that was defeated was not endorsed by the Opt-Out Organization, and interviewees believed the incumbent was defeated solely on the issue of opt-out because they did not support it.
SDC BOE Member 2 first ran for the School District C Board of Education in 2017. They lost to an incumbent in a cycle that was non-traditional. One seat was up for election due to the decrease in the number of available seats the board had because of a previously passed measure by voters. Opt-out or Whole Child Theory were not cited as reasons for the re-election of the incumbent. The Opt-Out Organization did not make an endorsement in the district in 2017.

In 2018, one incumbent and one open seat challenger were endorsed by the Opt-Out Organization. Both were victorious at the polls. The third winner, not endorsed by the Opt-Out Organization, joined the three victors in an endorsement from the School District C teachers union. The candidate who came in fourth place also did not receive the Opt-Out endorsement or an endorsement from the teachers union.

In 2019, SDC BOE Member 1 ran for their first term after a long career as a K-12 district administrator. They cited the reason they ran as:

There was a general sense that there was a lot of angst and dissent on the Board of Education. I decided to run; I had grandchildren going to be in the district and I retired from being a district administrator, so I thought I had a lot to offer.

SDC BOE Member 1 ran with Opt-Out Organization backing in 2019. While they were unopposed in the election, they were pro-opt-out. When at the meet the candidate forum, they recalled saying something to the extent of,

This form of testing… is difficult to assess the value of it since we are not quite sure what exactly we are testing and to what end. I still felt at the time that there was a certain degree of cultural bias- there was a clear group of children that were not going to do well on those tests. I did not see it as an equitable vehicle for
assessment when your language skills for reading and writing and comprehension come into question… you need to be at a certain level to be successful on the tests. I did not know what the purpose of the tests was. That’s why I was ok with opting-out… not for a political reason, but just in terms of assessment.

SDC BOE Member 2 was also supportive of the opt-out decision but did not receive the endorsement of the Opt-Out Organization. Reflecting on their stance on opt-out during their campaigns for the board, they said:

I pivoted to parents are an integral part to the learning process and everything should be done to cultivate that relationship and partnership for the betterment of children.

They noted they filled out a candidate questionnaire wanting the endorsement of the Opt-Out Organization, in 2019, but did not receive it. Though unopposed, the two other candidates for the three seats received the endorsement and had declared positions on opt-out and won.

School District D

As in the other three districts, incumbents fared well in School District D. Depending on the election, opt-out and Whole Child Theory were either issues of the campaign that candidates spoke of, or not at all. The 2015 election in School District D had the most opt-out and Whole Child influence with candidates running with declared positions on them. As for the other elections between 2014-2019, opt-out and Whole Child discussions were not as evident or prominent.
According to SDD Administrator, who commented on the credentials you need to be a successful candidate for school board in School District D, noted the little influence PTA backgrounds have in School District D politics and elections. They said:

You don’t have to be PTA here. You just have to be a good person. You can’t be that person that people perceive as always having a problem or looking to find a problem. If you mean well, you have a good chance to being on the board.

School District D did not have much Opt-Out Organization momentum from 2014 to 2019. While they have had consistently competitive school board races, state testing has not been a large issue in the district. SDD BOE Member 1 contested and won an open seat special election in the winter of 2014. In that election, they perceived that some backlash was due to the fact that they were an educator, even though much of the community is made up of educators. On the perceived backlash, they said,

The thing I got beat up the most for was being in education when I ran the first time. Being in education… I took a big hit by a lot of people. They saw it as self-serving, and that I wanted to take care of union members.

In the regularly scheduled election in 2014, School District D had two incumbents unopposed for re-election. According to SDD BOE Member 1, “2015 was the biggest year where people had a lot of questions on opt-out.” They recalled, that “in 2012, there was a slate that ran together” who would go on to win the 2012 elections in the district. When they were up for re-election in 2015, “some chose not to run, and somebody lost” SDD BOE Member 1 remembered.

In 2015, School District D saw the Opt-Out Organization endorse a challenger in the election, who went on to defeat an incumbent board member. In the election, the incumbent
board number was not endorsed for re-election by the teachers union. Instead, the teachers union joined the Opt-Out Organization in endorsing the challenger. Another incumbent during the cycle who was not endorsed by Opt-Out, nor was their challenger in the by-seat election, was endorsed by the teachers union and was re-elected.

SDD Community Member provide some further insight into the election dynamics of 2015 in School District D:

The leadership of the district at the time felt like it was important to be Switzerland, or to be neutral. Our district administration was really strong as far as abiding by the guidelines of State Education and their regulations, but at the same time... you have to inform your community members. [District] leadership needed a little nudge in order to send out how parents and families should go about opting out...

SDD Community Member recollected that the district had a leader who pulled some “nonsensical shenanigans” during the 2015-era. This leader encouraged students to take the assessments. SDD Community Member added this district leader was “devious” about the opt-out decision by “hiding how to do it” and “coming up with nonsensical rules about it.” Perhaps, they added, this aided to the community opposition that resulted in angry parents showing up to the polls to express their views and oust an incumbent board member from their seat with an Opt-Out endorsed challenger in 2015.

In 2016, while the election was contested, only one candidate, an incumbent, filed for one of three seats. Two challengers were elected in a write-in campaign. The 2017 cycle saw two incumbents re-elected over challengers. In 2018, an incumbent board member was ousted by a
challenger, though neither were Opt-Out endorsed. The defeated incumbent would go to run again in 2019, being elected to an open seat.

**One District with a Consistent Pattern**

**School District D**

School District D is an outlier on Research Question 3 because School District D did not have as much Opt-Out Organization activity as one would anticipate. Even though the district had the highest opt-out rates of the four districts, the overall issue of opt-out was not as contentious as seen in the other districts. Whole Child Theory was also not a prominent campaign issue. SDD Community Member commented that the community was supportive of opt-out because of some of the angst surrounding the administration of the tests:

Folks were really upset of the rollout and privatization of the tests. When we saw samples and given the opportunity to speak up, we were ignored. So, parents took it to their own hands to advocate that these were not beneficial for our students. It was a large community effort.

When speaking to SDD Administrator, SDD BOE Member 1, and SDD Community Member, they agreed: while the community is overwhelmingly against the state assessments, opt-out is not a political issue during elections. “The community overwhelmingly opts their children out of the tests. Our candidate pool generally reflects the community” said SDD BOE Member 1. It is highly likely that all the candidates contesting in a School District D election are pro opt-out candidates. It was difficult for interviewees in School District D to pinpoint declared positions on opt-out or Whole Child Theory by incumbents or challengers because of the overwhelming popularity of both initiatives in the community. When they were able to pinpoint
candidates with declared positions, like in 2015, the Opt-Out Organization was contesting the election with endorsed candidates.

**Summary of Research Question 3 Findings**

Incumbents typically secured re-election in all four districts. Yet, across the four districts, Long Island Opt-Out endorsed candidates generally were elected to the school board in open seat races and were strong opponents to non-Opt-Out endorsed incumbents seeking re-election. Opt-Out endorsed candidates were more common in School Districts A and B than C and D. School District B had Opt-Out candidates win races for the school board between 2015 and 2019. School District A did as well, though no endorsements were made in 2015 and 2018. School Districts C and D had weaker Opt-Out Organization influence in their elections but did see pro-opt-out candidates with Opt-Out Organization backing run and win seats between 2014 and 2019.

All four districts saw an incumbent defeated for re-election by an Opt-Out endorsed challenger. Across the four districts, Opt-Out endorsed candidates were typically also endorsed by the teachers union, in cases for open seat races and against incumbents. An Opt-Out and teachers union endorsement, per interviewees, was a good combination to garner votes and support for a victory to the school board. Adding the power of incumbency creates a perfect trifecta for support from the community to secure a board seat.

**Research Question #4:**

The fourth research question was: Across the four districts, is there any evidence that school board incumbent electoral defeats were “focusing events” as defined by Kingdon (2011)? Was this the case for any open seat races?
a) In each case, were there any major changes in board policy agendas pertaining to opt-out and Whole Child Theory as a result of the focusing event?

b) Were any major policy changes pertaining to opt-out and Whole Child Theory adopted?

**Focusing Events and Windows of Opportunity**

As discussed in chapter 2, a “focusing event” is defined as driving forces that cause change, like national mood, organizational interests, and election repercussion, that open the window and lead to restructuring of the policy agenda. Kingdon defines windows as an opening of an opportunity, where the result of a change occurs in the problem or political stream (Kingdon, 2011). Among the four school districts, the defeats of incumbents or the elections of challengers to open seats did not provide a focusing event for any district. No major policy changes pertaining to opt-out or Whole Child Theory were adopted because Opt-Out candidates were elected and seated to their respective school board.

Elections in School District B were not focusing events for the Opt-Out agenda. No policy was implemented surrounding opt-out or Whole Child Theory because Opt-Out endorsed candidates were seated. In the past, SDB BOE Member 1 discussed board dynamics changing because of relationship issues between the board and district administration, but nothing to the extent of the research question being asked similarly occurred.

In School District D, district administration had a good rapport with the school board after 2015. SDD Community Member also cited good relationships between the teachers and district administration and school board. However, this was not always the case. The interviewees spoke of troubling relationships in the past between board members, administration, and the district community. SDD Community member, as mentioned previously, spoke about
“nonsensical shenanigans” by district leadership circa 2015, specifically regarding opt-out approaches. Similarly, SDD BOE Member 1 said that it was with “100%” certainty that board dynamics changed in 2015:

That vote [for school board in 2015] changed everything. If that result didn’t occur, I don’t know if the [current] Superintendent would be here, and I don’t know what the direction of the district would have been.

Recalling the 2015 election analysis from research question three, the 2015 election in School District D saw an incumbent board member ousted by an Opt-Out endorsed and teachers union endorsed candidate. SDD BOE Member 1 also noted that the prior superintendent would not have left the district as superintendent if the election victors had instead lost. The 2015 school board election in School District D may in fact have been a focusing event, perhaps not for opt-out or Whole Child policies as research question 4 poses, but for interpersonal dynamics that caused leadership power vacuums at both the district and board level. This could have been a building block for how the district eventually approached opt-out and Whole Child policies and thus, could have been an indirect cause in a shift in these ways of thinking and approaches. However, this election alone did not produce changes in policy or agenda setting practices. Though, it did bring in new leadership open to discussing how the district tackled both opt-out messaging and administration, and Whole Child Theory initiatives. It seemed to be a focusing event for changes in board-administration relationships, especially on the issue(s) of communication and opt-out messaging.
Legal Power of School Boards

Interviewees across the four districts identified a lack of legal power for school board members to be able to act on policy priorities from the Long Island Opt-Out Organization. There was frequently momentum during the campaign season to promote Whole Child reforms and continue pushing anti-test sentiment and the opt-out decision however, once supportive candidates were elected to the Board of Education, they found that their hands were tied. Major curriculum reform policy is largely dictated by the New York State Education Department (NYSED) and not by local school boards.

SDA BOE Member 1 commented on the rising lack of awareness in communities surrounding a school board:

People do not understand the role and the responsibility of a school board member. Whereby, they think that members can give direction of curriculum and restrictions of curriculum. It’s a very scary thing… making policies to restrict curricula? We can’t dictate people’s political agendas… the State in large part dictates what we can and cannot do.

Similarly, as a President of their Board of Education at a point between 2014-2019, SDB BOE Member 1 noted that collectively, their board members favored the opt-out decision, while SDB BOE Member 1 was against it. But the board's hands were tied:

When I was sitting as board president at the time, I knew that [opt-out] was collectively what the board supported. But then again, we are mandated to hold up whatever the law says… so you realize that it’s not your personal opinions. We
might have personal opinions but that doesn’t play here because we’re mandated by the State to give these tests.

**Opt-Out and Whole Child Theory Absent from Board Policy Agendas**

SDC BOE Member 1 found opt-out to be “more of a political action rather than an educational one.” Opting out a child is a political decision of a parent to make, as is the political alliance of a candidate with the Opt-Out Organization. SDC BOE Member 1 learned that the board could not discuss any methods or solutions to opt-out decision making since it was NYSED policy.

In School District D, Opt-Out was not an influence on board members and their policy positions. According to SDD BOE Member 1,

No, I don’t think there was a big Opt-Out Movement or anyone pushing board members. At the end of the day, even if your board members like tests or dislike State tests, it doesn’t really change you or your habits. You can still opt-out. Our board can say we want a test or are against them... it doesn’t matter what we say. If the parent gets to choose, it doesn’t matter what we say.

Across the four districts, the elections of candidates endorsed by Opt-Out were windows of opportunity for the Long Island Opt-Out Movement. While direct policy change was not apparent in the four districts, there were conversations on Opt-Out Organization positions during board meetings. Topics concerning Whole Child reforms like movement education, opt-out messaging, extended play or recess time, relationship building, and school start times reached board conversations across the four districts. In many cases, these topics of conversation were either brought to the board table by Opt-Out endorsed incumbents, or other board members who
saw their community supportive of the Opt-Out agenda and seized on the opportunity to discuss these issues.

**School Board Policy Agendas and Lack of Policy Adoption**

In the four districts, either after Opt-Out candidates were elected or incumbents perhaps paid more attention to the Opt-Out platform; conversations about opt-out and Whole Child occurred even though overall board policy agendas and policy adoption did not.

**School District A**

Whole Child reform efforts were largely missing from School District A. SDA Administrator believes “Whole Child” to be a “buzz word” and not a grounded educational concept. SDA Administrator said the district was implementing much of what a Whole Child Theory advocate would want to see occur:

We never made Whole Child a topic. From my perspective, we really talk a lot about and implement project-based learning, authentic assessments, movement activities, which inherently address the whole child. So, the Whole Child concept, if you are doing a good job with the kids, is part of your program... the arts, physical education. enrichment activities... we moved away from our own assessments… especially with young children, where we do not administer any local assessment, aside from a classroom teachers’ own test.

The School District A Board of Education has largely supported district administrative efforts to educate the Whole Child. One of the leading initiatives of Opt-Out advocates is extended recess time, so young elementary aged children can move around and interact with one
another and not continuously sit in the classroom with instructional materials. SDA Administrator agrees with that, but not through extended recess:

Our children need to be outside; they need to move. But that can happen in the classroom, not just at recess. Some believed [it best] to extend recess times, but we implemented movement in the classroom so instructional time is kept.

**SDA: Leadership and Board Dynamics**

SDA BOE Member 1 and 2 were highly supportive of the district’s administrative leadership. The board and the administration currently have a productive working relationship, however, that was not a similar story in the past.

SDA BOE Member 1 discussed how the elections of three Opt-Out endorsed candidates in 2016 and 2017 affected board dynamics. After 2017, out of the five-member board, three seats on the Board of Education were members endorsed by the Long Island Opt-Out Organization. This constituted a simple majority (three out of five) of the school board. Yet, this board majority did not produce any adoptions or implementations surrounding opt-out or Whole Child Theory.

School District A interviewees said “conversations changed” after the 2017 elections. Conversations changed to talking about more Whole Child policies, like limiting homework to allow for more play or extracurricular activities after school. The Board of Education researched elementary homework policies at the K-5 level and found inconsistencies. Teachers were giving two hours of homework content to one class, while others were giving much less. Through this evaluation, the district implemented a standard homework practice of providing homework but with consistent amounts among each elementary classroom.
SDA BOE Member 2, an Opt-Out Organization endorsed candidate both times they ran, agreed that the district moved in the right direction in terms of implementing Whole Child efforts prior to when they ran initially and throughout their board tenure:

[School District A] looks to find those niches and those individual strengths to provide [students] with opportunities to succeed. Which goes with the philosophy of Whole Child Theory. [School District A] brings in social-emotional learning and support within our classrooms. We try and support all learners through project-based activities. Collaboration, communication, and creativity... all those important things that students not only need to be successful in the classroom but also in life.

As conversations about Whole Child changed, board member relationships changed. The School District A interviewees discussed conversations surrounding efforts by several previous board members to pressure the Superintendent into administering the assessments to students.

SDA Administrator recalled:

I did have people on the board who wanted the district's position to be that we would, as a district, refuse to administer the tests. There were others who said we shouldn’t do that, and it should be parental choice. The district stuck with the latter. If we ever refused to administer the tests, they would bring charges against me, and I would lose my license.

Similarly, reflecting on changing board-administration dynamics because of the new board members elected, SDA BOE Member 2 said:
There were years where certain board members would ask the Superintendent to theoretically break the education law and not open the tests and send them all back... we had some passionate board members that would try to direct the Superintendent not to open the tests, as well as any field tests that we may have been assigned.

Those efforts were unsuccessful and not supported by the overall Board of Education. SDA BOE Member 2 also discussed some additional policy positions of the Opt-Out endorsed candidates who were more vocal in their advocacy as incumbent board members:

We had members... [who] were very big on a no homework initiative, hours of free play within the classroom, and a farm to table initiative. As well as double recess time... Overall, [those proposals] didn’t have any long-term lasting effects, but they did have success in the pedagogy in terms of hands-on learning, project based [learning], even to an extent, providing recess opportunities to our middle school students.

Overall, School District A embraced elements of Whole Child Theory both before and after Opt-Out endorsed candidates were elected to its school board. The dynamics of the board's relationship with administration changed at times as some board members demanded that administration act beyond their legal authority, which resulted in conflict between some board members and district administrative leadership.

**School District B**

School District B did not take official stances on opt-out, even after Opt-Out endorsed candidates were elected to the board and had a sizable presence. SDB Administrator noted they
are against opt-out and spoke with the Opt-Out endorsed board members that they will uphold their duty as a district leader and not refuse the tests at any point, as was seen in other Long Island districts at the time.

SDB Administrator noted that the district administered the tests because they had to:

The district didn’t make a big deal about [the tests]… this was a losing battle. It was unwinnable. Once the state said they were not going to do anything [about opting out], all we did was give the tests and advise the parents on how to opt-out.

When notifying parents of students eligible to take the state assessments, District B sent home a mailer informing them of their choices. The district did not encourage an opt-out or opt-in decision. They laid out the process by stating they respect parental choice. However, SDB Administrator often faced pushback from community members saying “how dare you” to their letter stating tests would be administered to students. SDB Administrator would remind them of their oath to uphold the education law and that they are required to give the tests. They noted that if a parent did not want their child to take the tests, then they could send in the opt-out letter. The district or school board could not refuse to administer the tests.

District leadership approaches or views on opt-out did not change as a result of Opt-Out member election victories to the school board in School District B.

According to School District B interviewees, Whole Child Theory was something discussed in the board room. Whole Child Theory conversations came up from two Opt-Out endorsed incumbents, thus changing board policy conversation. In the district, there have been more conversations surrounding Whole Child Theory and its effects on students rather than policy action to enforce it in classrooms. However, the concept of movement in the classroom has been
implemented over the years, which SDB Administrator cited as a combination of “what the
district always did” and with the support of vocal board members in support of the
implementation. Yet, the board did not approve or call for movement in the classroom, as it was
a district administrative priority and action.

The more controversial calls by the Long Island Opt-Out Organization for extended
recess or switching high school and elementary start times to benefit the whole child across the
district have not been implemented, though they were discussed. SDB Administrator discussed
the more controversial stances of many Opt-Out members, including two board members in the
district:

We’ve considered both expanded recess and switching high school and
elementary start times. The reason why we don’t do expanded recess is we have a
very robust schedule. I don’t know how that helps a student. Secondly, regarding
start times, we’ve talked about it at length… we were having a big robust
cornerstone conversation about if before COVID hit.

On switching start times, SDB Administrator added:

The biggest issue is transportation and sports. Sports start at a certain time, and
we would have to get the kids done with school and on to the buses that deal with
sports. Additionally, we run our own [bus] fleet and we just don’t have the drivers
to do it.

SDB BOE Member 1, as a former elementary school principal, had many thoughts on policy
suggestions on extended recess times at the elementary level over the years:
After 20-25 minutes of [children] running around, those children are done. What makes a lot more sense than extended recess is when you… after the first hour and a half [of instruction] the kids get up, if you look at brain research, and you put a 2-3 minute video on, and the kids get up and dance and move and they get their brain going and receive more oxygen… that has a much better effect than giving kids an hour to run around.

They went on to counter extended recess supporters claims, including that of some of their board colleagues, of advancing social emotional learning skills in children by stating:

And you want to talk about social emotional learning, holistic child, what about those kids that don’t like to run around or don’t have friends? It even gives them more time to feel isolated. [Extended recess] ‘sounds good’…

The district has implemented programs to combat “play deficits” among children, SDB Administrator noted that students need to learn how to play, outside:

We have had to, actually, institute programs like Peaceful Playground, because kids don’t know how to play. It’s so scary... I think parents overschedule children… we need to let kids be kids outside. I’ve talked to people who have their kids' lives scheduled from the minute they get home from school, all weekend long, with travel time… it’s too much. So, then they want us to provide them with additional play time where we’re watching them.

Peaceful Playgrounds, Inc. is an outside company whose mission is to:

Create a safe play environment, support healthy active kids, and advocate for recess and free play. We believe the benefits of free play are best accomplished
by enhancing the play environment and allowing children lots of choices
(Peaceful Playgrounds, 2018).

Thus, School District B, through the use of this external vendor, implemented and
promoted free play during recess time. However, the significant electoral success of Long Island
Opt-Out Organization endorsed candidates in the district does not appear responsible for these
efforts. School District B has implemented movement in the classroom to mitigate the play
deficit among children during the instructional school day.

SDB Administrator cited increased concerns of a general knowledge base among their
community members of the differences between the grades 3 through 8 assessments versus high
school Regents exams. At the time, the district had to alter their leadership approaches to the
different grade level assessments to promote more education into their differences. As the opt-
out decision grew in its support throughout School District B, SDB Administrator said there was
an assumption a student could opt-out of any exam administered by the district:

I had a student email me who was one of the first students who had no tests
because the parents had opted out all the way through. And now it came time to
take the Regents exam. So, he sends me an email and says I would like to opt out
of the Regents exam. And my response was, ‘so you are going to opt of a diploma
because that’s required.’

School District C

In School District C, as the Opt-Out Organizations platform continued to resonate with
the district community, a change in conversation occurred among board members to pay more
attention to the social and emotional wellbeing of their students, at all ages. SDC Administrator
said, when referring to a change in board member conversations, “we definitely have some board members making sure that there are the social emotional resources for interventions and opportunities for our students should they need them.”

Yet, the district did not act on any Opt-Out Organization policy proposals. Some board members inquired about popular Opt-Out calls for extended recess, which was not something SDC Administrator could manage to see being effective in the district. Programs would need to be cut and testing put to the side, which was something the district was not willing to do.

School District C did not promote or criticize the opt-out decision before or after Opt-Out candidates were elected to the school board. School district officials stuck to messaging about the right of parental choice. SDC Administrator said the district “sees the value in the tests but we also understand that parents pay a critical role in a child’s education.”

SDC Administrator reflected that, over the years, parents in the community would not allow the district to forget the foundations of supporting the whole child. Parents did not want the district to only rely on students taking tests but balance it with essential practices promoted by the Opt-Out Organization such as play and movement activity. SDC Administrator stated they always knew the district and its larger community did not want to “get too wrapped in just tests.” The district, over the years, has provided a balance between testing and keeping whole child motives alive in their curriculum.

**School District D**

SDD Administrator said School District D has adopted and implemented much of what the Opt-Out Movement espouses, elements of Whole Child Theory. Though this was not because of Opt-Out influence from its board members. It was always something they did in the district:
I started a social emotional task force that we do... we meet on a monthly basis. We look at what we can provide our students, families, and staff from a social-emotional standpoint... We have implemented no homework nights; we have implemented activity nights… my whole premise is how to bring the family together... Everything is so orchestrated… so scheduled. Kids go from school to soccer practice, then basketball. We are trying to move away from that.

The district had been implementing Whole Child reform practices before and during the heightened electoral popularity of Long Island Opt-Out school board candidates in the district. Though the district has not extended recess, they have added play into their daily classroom schedules. They’ve also instituted a program entitled “The Energy Bus” surrounding positive reinforcement and creating relationships between children and staff. They have also created a “Go to Person” program to support the social and emotional elements of Whole Child reform to allow for students to have someone to go to when they need help.

Similar to the other districts interviewed, School District D sends out mailers and information sheets to parents of students eligible to take the assessments. This communication style was new after the district selected a new superintendent, versus their previous ways of communicating with parents to take the tests, according to SDD Community Member.

According to SDD Administrator, the district tries to educate parents on the assessments. “We will do workshops on what the tests can be used for. I will never talk about them [the assessments] relating to a teacher; it will be more an instructional point of view.” In the district, parents were given a permission form. If they chose to opt-out, they sent the letter back signed. This common practice has been consistent, and no election of a new board member led to changes in this practice between 2015-2019.
Summary of Research Question 4 Findings

Defeats of incumbents or victories of open seats by Opt-Out endorsed candidates for school boards did not seem to be focusing events across the four districts. However, they did present windows of opportunity for the Long Island Opt-Out Movement. The Opt-Out Organization’s ability to capitalize on the election process with endorsed candidates who won open seats or defeated incumbents provoked new board conversations surrounding Opt-Out Organization policy priorities, like Whole Child reform.

Interviewees reported that district conversations changed as a result of Opt-Out influence. Interviewees across the four districts cited conversations surrounding change in school start times, movement education, student-to-student mental health and relationship building, as well as extended recess as policy conversations during board meetings. While there were no specific, formal board policies implemented on these issues, all four districts have implemented Whole Child reform efforts to address emotional, social, and physical needs of their students. The extent to which the Opt-Out Organization influenced such efforts is difficult to determine in this study.

Notably, in School District D, there was a focusing event that occurred where the election of Opt-Out endorsed candidates won seats on the school board. As a result, the district's leadership transitioned and prior approaches to opt-out messaging practices changed to be more aligned with both the teachers unions and Opt-Out organization's priorities. Instead of the district discouraging parents from opting out, the district now messaged “parental choice” as how they would adhere to a parents’ right to oversee their child's educational practices. While no board policy was enacted due to this, leadership did change, and leadership practices altered to be more in favor towards Opt-Out Organization philosophy after a 2015 election that saw Opt-Out endorsed candidates win seats on the school board.
Concluding Patterns & Analysis

Research Question One: Prominent Issues in School Board Campaigns

Based on interviews with informants from the four Long Island school districts, issues surrounding testing, opt-out, APPR, parental choice, school safety, taxes, fiscal responsibility, and board transparency with the community were popular campaign issues between 2014-2019.

Opting-out of NYS mandated tests was most consequential as a political issue on the school board campaign trail between 2015 and 2017. In 2014, the opt-out decision was too new for it to be a contentious topic. While it was a topic of conversation in 2018 and 2019, the popular sentiment among the school and community leaders interviewed was that it was a waning issue; many people were settled into their philosophies on the issue or other issues supplanted it as a major concern of voters.

As for Whole Child Theory, districts did see it as a minor topic of conversation through 2014-2019, but more sporadically compared to opt-out. All four districts, at one point, had Long Island Opt-Out Organization endorsed candidates run and win elections to their respective school boards. However, Whole Child Theory was not a consequential campaign issue that led to their victories or was a topic of concern for voters, as compared to state testing, parental choice, and opt-out.

Research Question Two: Policy Entrepreneurs

Teachers unions met the criteria of what it means to be a policy entrepreneur in school districts A, B, C, and D. They entered the political fray by interviewing and endorsing candidates for the school board. They invested substantial time, energy, and monetary resources into advancing candidates by sending out mailers to NYSUT members in their districts and phone
banking voters by calling them to get out the vote for their endorsed candidates. This goes with the anticipation that the candidates that teachers unions support will be friendly to the priorities of the union when making decisions on the board. In the four districts, while teachers unions are known to back incumbents, they have bucked the trend at times by endorsing challengers against incumbents. Their power and influence in school district elections are significant. Interviewees in this study indicated that teachers union endorsement of a board candidate almost certainly correlates to an election victory.

There were some other active interest groups throughout the districts. School District A had an Anti-APPR group that was “mom and pop” that articulated their opposition to student grades being reflected in teacher evaluations. In School District B and D, the CSEA union, and in District B a community group called the “Tax Pack” vocalized their concerns and endorsed school board candidates.

**Research Question Three: Candidate Positions and Election Results**

The four school districts saw school board candidates endorsed by Long Island Opt-Out hold positions supportive of opt-out, and at times, Whole Child Theory. This analysis is detailed further in Table 4.5. Some districts also had candidates who opposed opt-out. However, all may not have been open about their opposition. Thus, it is difficult to assess these candidates between 2014 to 2019.

Between 2014 to 2019, school districts A, B, C, and D, had candidates with declared positions on opt-out and Whole Child Theory. It was rare that interviewees knew candidates’ declared positions on Whole Child Theory. As previously discussed, this curriculum reform was rarely discussed on the campaign trail. In District A and B’s case, they did have candidates
elected to the board that were stronger proponents of Whole Child Theory in 2015, 2016 and
2017 than in Districts C and D. Nonetheless, the political impact of Whole Child Theory in these
cases is not clear.

In 2014, no endorsements were made in the four districts by Long Island Opt-Out since,
presumably, the testing procedures were being administered for the first time and opposition
remained quiet until a full picture of the process could be seen. The 2015 cycle saw Opt-Out
backed candidates contest in districts B and D. Districts A, B, and C had Opt-Out candidates in
2016, District D did not. In 2017, Districts A and B had Opt-Out candidates. In 2017, Districts B
and C did, as well as in 2019, where Districts A, B, and C had Opt-Out candidates run.

Known anti-opt-out candidates contested elections in District A (candidate defeated) and
in District B in 2016 and 2019 (candidate won). Districts B and C had perceived “anti-teacher
union” incumbent candidates contest elections in 2015, who both lost. While support for teachers
and the choice to opt-out seemingly go hand in hand, it is wrong to presume that anti-teacher
union candidates are also anti-opt-out candidates since, for example, SDB BOE Member 1 is
anti-opt-out but is always endorsed by the teachers union in their elections. This data point
illustrates the complexity of local education politics.

Research Question Four: Focusing Events and Agenda Setting

Elections in which school board incumbents were defeated by Long Island Opt-Out
endorsed candidates did not meet the definition of “focusing events.” Similarly, there is no
evidence that elections for open seat races were focusing events in the four districts. Board
policy agendas did not change after Opt-Out endorsed candidates were elected, in terms of
promoting opt-out, lobbying the state to get rid of the tests entirely, or adopting any Whole Child efforts.

It should be noted that elements of Whole Child Theory were evident in all four districts. All districts noted that they have implemented policies that fall under Whole Child reform. These include programs that require movement in the classroom and student-led initiatives to voice their concerns or partner with other students to make interpersonal connections. However, the major Whole Child efforts espoused by strong Opt-Out board members, as seen in District A, like homework elimination, extended recess, and switching high school and elementary start times were not implemented in any of the four districts.

Board dynamics can change due to elections. Elections for school board can be focusing events that can change how the board operates. In this study, relationships between fellow board members and with district administration reportedly changed in one district. School District D’s election in 2015 proved to be a focusing event for the Opt-Out Organization and the teachers union policy agendas as it led to a district leadership transition that favored both organizations' interests. In at least one district, newly elected board members opposed the current superintendent’s positions on testing.

In the end, incumbent defeats by Opt-Out candidates and/or Opt-Out candidate wins to open seats were not focusing events and did not supply windows of opportunity for opt-out or Whole Child theory policies being adopted or implemented in the four districts. However, in all four districts to some extent in 2014-2019, they did lead to new conversations, new ways of thinking, and new relationships on the board that focused on opt-out and Whole Child Theory.
### Table 4.6: List of Major Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question #1: Prominent Issues in School Board Campaigns</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taxes, Fiscal Responsibility, School Security, and Transparency were leading campaign issues between 2014 and 2019.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Opt-out was a leading campaign issue, mostly between 2015-2017.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole Child Theory was not a leading campaign issue among the four districts.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Research Question #2: Policy Entrepreneurs and Interest Groups</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers unions are policy entrepreneurs. They played a large role in the political and policy dynamics of the districts. They had a direct influence on school board elections in this study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other local organizations had varied or waning influence in the political and policy spheres. CSEA unions, as an interest group, endorsed some candidates, but typically backed the candidates the teachers unions supported. In years past, PTAs had some influence on school board races. In this study, they no longer held influence on the political or policy stage during 2014-2019.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue-specific advocacy groups such as “tax packs” and anti-APPR groups came and went in districts as issues became popular and voters lost interest.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Research Question #3: Understanding the Candidates and Board Election Results</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incumbents fared well over challengers. Opt-Out endorsed candidates, as well as teachers union endorsed candidates, held better odds of defeating incumbents, getting re-elected, or securing an open seat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-opt-out candidates generally did not secure victories across the four districts. One incumbent opposed to opt-out had a long-held seat and teachers union endorsement.</td>
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</table>
Candidates who were incumbents, backed by the teachers union, and supported by Long Island Opt-Out enjoyed a nearly perfect trifecta for securing a seat on the school board.

**Research Question #4: Focusing Events, Agenda Setting, and Policy Adoption**

School board elections have not been focusing events for the Opt-Out or Whole Child Theory policy agendas to be promoted and enacted at the district level.

The 2015 election in School District D was a focusing event for some political tensions and altered relationships among district leaders and board members. These dynamics may have been a building block for future District D messaging and positioning towards opt-out policy and Whole Child Theory with the community.

All four districts implemented Whole Child Theory reform efforts between 2014-2019, though not entirely because of Opt-Out Organization electoral success. However, school board conversations about Whole Child Theory were introduced by Opt-Out-endorsed school board members.

There is a difference between campaign rhetoric and policy decision making. School board candidates can have ambitious plans for board policy agendas; however, once elected and an incumbent, state and federal legalities outweigh prior political rhetoric espoused on the campaign trail. School board members and district administration take an oath to follow New York State education law despite personal political opinions.

**Unanticipated Findings for Future Studies**

Unethical political behavior of individual teachers and PTA organizations in School Districts A and B.
In District A, some board members pressured district administration to disobey New
York State testing policies and procedures.
Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

This study sought to grant further insight into the political and electoral influences of the Long Island Opt-Out Movement in races for school district boards of education. It also sought to gain an understanding of agenda setting practices when Long Island Opt-Out Organization endorsed candidates won seats on school boards.

As discussed in chapters 1 and 2, existing research on the Long Island Opt-Out Organization often focuses on sociological matters such as why a parent opts a child out of testing and the demographic stratification between districts with high opt-out rates versus low opt-out rates. Very little research has been done on the political, electoral, and policy agenda impacts of the Long Island Opt-Out Organization on school districts. Using a political science framework focused on electoral politics, policy, entrepreneurs, and policy agendas, this study found that the Long Island Opt-Out Organization had a profound influence on school board races where the opt-out decision continued to be a popular choice among parents each spring when state exams were administered.

As discussed in chapter 4, major findings for each research question were discovered. While there were limitations of the study, the research yielded useful findings on the historical context of the Long Island Opt-Out Movement and Organization, the lives and careers of school board candidates and school administrators, and political patterns in education politics in four Long Island school districts during 2014-2019. With the lessons learned from the interviews and other data, recommendations for future research and future education policy can be made.
Major Findings

The Long Island Opt-Out Organization had major influence in school board elections where their message resonated with voters. Across the four districts examined, the opt-out policy was a top issue for voters between 2014-2019. Taxes, fiscal responsibility, school security, and transparency in communications from the district to the community were other significant issues on the minds of voters during this period. Whole Child Theory, the subject of Research Question 1, was not a leading issue for voters across the four districts.

The districts saw interest group influence from PTAs, the CSEA union, and/or local “mom and pop” issue-based groups come and go between 2014 to 2019. In contrast, teachers unions in all four districts fit the definition of what Kingdon (2011) called “policy entrepreneurs.” They exercised large influence in both the political and policy sphere to advance their interests.

When seeking re-election, incumbent school board candidates generally were victorious over challengers across the four districts. Yet, challengers endorsed by the Long Island Opt-Out Organization posed a significant challenge to incumbents, with at least one incumbent identified as defeated in their election in each school district between 2014 and 2019. Candidates endorsed by the Long Island Opt-Out Organization were popular in school districts A and B, being elected and re-elected over the years. Such candidates also did well in school districts C and D, but the Long Island Opt-Out Organization did not play as significant of a role in districts C and D as they did in districts A and B.

Kingdon (2011) defines “focusing events” as driving forces that cause change, such as a sudden change in an indicator, a crisis, or a powerful symbol that catches on. Focusing events
can lead to restructuring of the policy agenda. In all four districts, school board elections did not prove to be focusing events for the Long Island Opt-Out Organization’s policy agenda. Opt-Out endorsed candidates did promote conversations surrounding Whole Child Theory policies when on the board, but overall, the school boards did not adopt Whole Child reform efforts district wide. Interviewees in all four districts reported district appreciation for many aspects of Whole Child Theory, including movement education and social connections for students. However, this trend was not connected to the Long Island Opt-Out Organization and school board election politics.

**Limitations of the Study**

**COVID-19 Impact on Assessment Administration**

When developing the research plan for this dissertation, it was intended for the research to devote attention and understanding to the 2019-2020 school year, to allow for more up to date analysis of opt-out politics and school board elections across the Long Island region. However, New York State “suspended the 2020 elementary- and intermediate level state assessments due to the coronavirus pandemic which forced schools throughout New York to close” (Silberstein, 2020).

In a statement from then NYS Interim-Commissioner of Education Shannon Tahoe, there was acknowledgement of the need for schools and communities to focus on the COVID-19 crisis from the pandemic's initial spread, versus focusing on state assessments. Commenting on the impact of school closures on state assessments, then-Interim-Commissioner of Education Shannon Tahoe stated:
The school closures caused by novel coronavirus are unprecedented and so, we have to make unprecedented decisions for our students… It is most important that during the time of closure, schools are able to continue to focus their efforts toward local school and community needs, as they have been doing, and not be concerned about state assessments (Silberstein, 2020).

Because no tests were administered, the first criterion for selecting case districts-- consistent similar opt-out rates on ELA and math exam during all years of this study-- could not be accommodated since opt-out rates could not be reported by each Long Island school district. Nevertheless, the opt-out and election data and individual experiences of those interviewed for 2014-2019 provided plentiful information for addressing the research questions.

**COVID-19 Impact on Increased Participation in School Elections in 2020**

The impact of COVID-19 on school elections in 2020 also presented limitations on extending the data collection beyond 2019. Because the spread of the virus was extensive, and vaccinations were still being developed in May 2020, New York State suspended in-person elections for school districts. School districts, instead, mailed each registered voter in their school district a ballot to fill out (Spector, 2020). In the traditional sense, a voter would have to travel to their polling place to cast their ballot. In 2020, the ballot was delivered to their residence. The heightened turnout of voters through the number of ballots cast was unprecedented for Long Island school districts.

In the 2019 school elections, most voters had to vote at their school polling place and 162,129 votes were cast in both Nassau and Suffolk Counties. In 2020, 460,985 voters participated, a 184.3% increase in turnout from 2019 (DiNapoli, 2020). Thus, voter turnout itself
was a confounding variable establishing 2020 as an outlier compared to 2014-2019. Voting was easier and perhaps higher turnout could lead to very different results because of more voters participating who may or may not have been motivated by support or opposition to a particular candidate or issue such as opt-out.

**Scope of Study**

The Long Island Opt-Out Organization has impacted Long Island school district politics, elections, and school board agendas since 2014. The case studies of four districts in this dissertation yielded useful findings on the impact of the Long Island Opt-Out Organization’s political, electoral, and policy influence on Long Island schools. However, four cases represent 3% of public-school districts on Long Island. The findings in this dissertation provide a foundation for future research on additional districts.

**Recommendations for Policy and Leadership**

*Defining the power of a Board of Education*

A crucial question arising from the research findings is: What is the power of a board of education? The interviewees were unified in their judgment of what they believe are misguided ideas from community members about what they themselves as board members can do for their constituents. This study brought to light interest groups and policy entrepreneurs, like Long Island Opt-Out activists or teachers unions, who seek to influence school district policy. In many cases, their calls are within the jurisdiction of what a board can do. Tenure approval of teachers, contract review for building and grounds projects, district budget review and adoption, as well as supporting district administrative efforts on student-led initiatives or programs are within the scope of what board members can make decisions on or support. What they cannot do is reject
state and federal education law, reject policies from the State Education Department, or create their own set of curriculum contrary to that directed by New York State.

It is difficult to identify possible and tangible solutions to this knowledge deficit among the public. Elected officials at the local, state, and federal level need to be called upon by school district leaders, concerned parents, community members, and yes, students to lead on education issues facing public schools. School boards, in many aspects, do not wield the power that elected officials in local, state, and federal government hold in their grasp. Districts, based on this study, could also consider increased information sessions or mailers to their community about the roles and responsibilities of their school board. Such efforts might correct pre-conceived ideas about school board jurisdiction and power over the education of children in a given district. Currently in 2022, there is growing interest in school district governance in communities across Long Island and elsewhere in the United States. As a result, districts should take the opportunity to conduct town hall sessions with their residents to inform them on district issues, rather than relying on the formal operations of a school board meeting. In addition to helping inform community members, these town halls could motivate more civic engagement by increasing voter awareness on policies, district issues, policymakers making decisions on behalf of the school district, and thus, may increase voter participation or encourage community members to run for the school board.

**Political Leaders and the Rhetoric about Parents**

In chapter 2, a quote from then-U.S. Secretary of State Arne Duncan under President Obama is cited as having claimed that the Opt-Out Movement was spurred by “white suburban moms” who were angry about how new standards portrayed their child and their child’s school. This infuriated many Opt-Out activists, who took this comment by Secretary Duncan as
motivation to fight against Common Core Standards. The Opt-Out Movement, particularly on Long Island, proved to be highly influential in school district politics and elections, because of backlash against government leaders and the standardized testing policies they enact.

In education politics, there is anger among parents who believe government and politicians are making decisions or hold opinions contrary to parent interests in their child's education. In 2021, Democratic gubernatorial candidate for Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe drew criticism for his remarks at a debate when he declared, “I don’t think parents should be telling schools what they should teach (Kingkade, 2022).” In 2022, there were allegations that current-U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona solicited a letter from the National School Boards Association calling parent protesters against COVID policies and diversity and inclusion curricula “domestic terrorists” (Hasson, 2022). Also in 2022, the Michigan Democratic Party shared a social media post that claimed parents are not the client of public schools, but the public is. It went on to say how the purpose of public schools is not to teach what parents want, but what society needs them to know. The post was later deleted, and the Michigan Democratic Party issued a statement that parents “need to have a say” in their child’s education (Poff, 2022).

No one political party or political leader has a monopoly on what is best for parents and students in K-12 schools. What is brought to light in this study is that parents wield much power and influence over the education of children. They make decisions, like the opt-out decision, on behalf of their child based on principles that they believe are in their child's best interest. They may go to board meetings, vote in school elections, and may even run for the school board themselves based on notions of frustration or anger from national, state, or local education leaders and decision makers.
For an issue like opt-out, SDD Administrator noted that when student assessments are again administered, the district worries about the participation rates. Because opt-out has become an engrained value in the community, there is fear the district may no longer be competitive with other districts:

Our high school is a blue-ribbon high school. We excel and we are at top twenty advanced regents diploma rates... but we are going to end up on a list because we don’t have the proper number of assessments [administered] at [grades] 3 through 8. So, we are going to get hit with participation rates.

Decisions like opt-out can have consequences for districts and their standing when compared to other districts. If education leaders and politicians want parent buy-in to their policies and actions, they must not disregard their opinions or concerns, but embrace them in conversation to develop policies and practices that best serve the interests of communities, schools, parents, and students.

**Bring in all Stakeholders to Policy Discussions, Prior to Implementation**

In chapter 4 of this study, SDB Administrator and SDC BOE Member 1 recalled conversations they had with then-NYS Education Commissioner John King about the roll out of APPR. They expressed frustration, and some disbelief, that local education leaders were not consulted or given the opportunity to weigh in on policy implementation coming from NYSED. Evident by these comments, district leaders found it difficult to defend APPR to opponents of the policy as the district leaders themselves did not agree with its rollout but were obligated to uphold state policy.
Local school leaders, like a superintendent, have a broad, first-hand understanding of the individual needs of their school district. They know the community, its teachers, its parents, and its students. There are different ideological philosophies on how government should approach policy enactment, whether that be from federal or state government leaders and legislative bodies or local leaders directly serving the community. This recommendation, regarding stakeholders does not suggest what or whose authority to make decisions and implement policy is best for education. Rather, calls for all education stakeholders should be included in discussions of policy before implementation to understand all factors, all implications, and all impacts on the people the policy proposal is meant to serve.
### Table 5.1: Summary of Recommendations for Policy and Leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendations</th>
<th>Proposed Actions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Define the power of a board of education</strong></td>
<td>Leaders in education, at the federal, state, and local levels, should work together on defining the role of a school board to district community members through meaningful community messaging campaigns. There is a deficit in understanding the role, power, and jurisdiction a school board has over curriculum. This study found that some candidates for school board and community members have asked or demanded that school officials break education law. Such action places a school official’s license and position in jeopardy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education leaders should tone down the negative rhetoric about parental involvement in education</strong></td>
<td>Controversial rhetoric from education leaders, candidates for federal and state office regarding parents and their actions towards their child's education spur activism and political coalitions. Toning down the rhetoric about parental involvement in a child's education may lead to more meaningful discourse about policies, assessments, and school building and classroom environments. As noted in chapter 2, parental involvement leads to positive contributions in the education of a child. An education leader suggesting parental involvement is “bad” or “gets in the way” is contrary to scholarly research on this important educational component.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Include all stakeholders in policy discussions, prior to implementation</strong></td>
<td>Federal and state leader consultation with local education leaders who represent a diverse array of school district communities is needed to assess impact, benefits, and consequences of policy proposals for diverse school communities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recommendations for Future Research

Unanticipated Findings for Future Studies

There were unanticipated findings across the four districts. School Districts A and B interviewees brought up ethical questions that the districts dealt with between 2014-2019. In School District A, the PTA used to be politically involved in school elections, going as far as endorsing candidates for school board and campaigning on a candidate's behalf. As a deemed non-political organization, the PTA faced ethical inquiries into these campaign activities. Moreover, in School District A, several board members asked the superintendent not to administer state assessments to students, whereby the superintendent would be defying NYSED rules. In School District B, teachers who were actively opposed to state assessments and in favor of the opt-out choice of parents participated in public rallies with the Long Island Opt-Out Organization, against the wishes of their employer, the School District B administration.

For future research, are these ethical dilemmas and questions about appropriate political actions outliers? Are they unique to the districts where they occurred, or have other school districts throughout Long Island and New York State faced similar situations? In future research, it would be useful to examine organizations such as PTAs and the political actions of teachers. Research on these concerns could lead to strategies for school boards and school district leadership to navigate these ethical dilemmas in their districts.

Increased Political Spectacle of School Board Races on Long Island

SDA BOE Member 1, said that it was known in the community they would seek re-election when their term was up:
I started my campaign the day after my last election. The dynamics have completely changed on Long Island, especially regarding school boards and their elections for the board.

This notion was recognized by interviewees across the four districts. For them, opt-out politics has slowly become a concern of the past. When opt-out politics was at its strongest, it had real and lasting effects on school board races and policy priorities. This reality is seen to the present day, but not because of the Opt-Out Movement. Instead, COVID-19 policies surrounding masks and vaccinations have taken center stage with other issues such as opt-out concerns, curriculum implementation and whether Critical Race Theory is being taught in classrooms. New community organizations have formed, and political parties have taken an interest in school board elections. For example, SDB BOE Member 2 discussed the role of their political party club and how they organized themselves in SDB BOE Member 2’s most recent election to put up lawn signs, speak at meetings, call voters, and drive voters to the polls on behalf of SDB BOE Member 2. The party, as SDB BOE Member 2 claimed, has never contributed to their campaign in the past, but took particular interest due to concerns of COVID-19 policies and Critical Race Theory. School board elections in New York State are supposed to be nonpartisan.

The Long Island Opt-Out Movement, leveraged by an organized political coalition of concerned parents and students over high stakes standardized testing, its relationship with teacher evaluations, and impact on students’ well-being was a blueprint at the local level for school politics and school board elections. Future research in educational policy and leadership should focus on how these new emerging issues and political developments impact school board elections and district policy agendas.
Critical Race Theory

Per the American Bar Association, Critical Race Theory “critiques how the social construction of race and institutionalized racism perpetuate a racial caste system that relegates people of color to the bottom tiers (George, 2021).” With that, there is a narrative in communities that the theory promotes racism against people who are of the White race. All interviewees discussed the impact of Critical Race Theory on their political environments in their districts. The focus started nationally in 2021. The concept of Critical Race Theory has stirred up much political interest among communities, voters, and government leaders.

Challenges to Critical Race Theory have become a popular political tool on the political right. According to Newsday, in Idaho, Governor Brad Little (R) signed a law limiting the ways teachers can discuss race and gender and banning what the legislation called “tenets of Critical Race Theory.” North Dakota's Governor, Doug Bergum (R), signed into law a bill that banned instruction of Critical Race Theory (Schneider, 2022). In addition, the 2021 election for Virginia Governor was in large part a referendum on this educational concept and its surrounding rhetoric. In that election, then-candidate Glenn Youngkin (R) ran on a platform of ending conversations surrounding Critical Race Theory in public schools. Youngkin won the election, and on his first day in office, signed Executive Order Number One, which “restores excellence in education by ending the use of divisive concepts, including Critical Race Theory, in public education (Exec. Order No. 1, 2022).

Looking at how Critical Race Theory has played at the local level, in Suffolk County, Long Island in 2021, a new politically driven organization emerged on Long Island called “Long Island Loud Majority.” This organization, largely affiliated with the “Make America Great Again” movement inspired by former U.S. President Donald Trump, has leveraged influence
across Long Island in school board races. In many aspects, Long Island Loud Majority took on some of the strategies of the Long Island Opt-Out Organization by endorsing candidates and campaigning on candidate's behalf. The Long Island Loud Majority’s influence and support led to three of their endorsed candidates securing seats on the Smithtown Central School District Board of Education in 2021 (Schneider, 2022). After campaigning on a platform that accused the district of teaching elements of Critical Race Theory, a police union called the Suffolk County Police Benevolent Association (PBA) joined Long Island Loud Majority in their endorsement of the successful school board candidates. In the history of the Suffolk County PBA, they had never before endorsed candidates for school board (Lane, 2021). The election proved to be a referendum on the school district and its three board incumbents seeking re-election, where school officials said they were not teaching Critical Race Theory or promoting concepts of “white privilege” to students (Schneider, 2022; Lane, 2021).

**Comparing Long Island Opt-Out Organization to Long Island Loud Majority**

Interviewees noted that the Long Island Opt-Out Movement, while still playing a large role in school board elections to the present day, is no longer a major campaign issue for voters. All interviewees across the four districts cited Long Island Loud Majority’s emergence on the political and electoral stage in their school elections, as school board elections become more politically polarized. While candidates running for school board are traditionally non-partisan, meaning they do not run with political party support or ideology, Long Island is seeing political affiliation of candidates play a role in school board elections. Long Island Loud Majority, as well as affiliate groups on Long Island like “Moms for Liberty” are actively seeking to gain influence over school governance and decision-making by endorsing school board candidates with conservative or libertarian ideologies. Their common message, which is somewhat similar to
central themes of the Long Island Opt-Out Organization, is less government oversight, fewer mandates, and less state and federal interference in local control of schools.

**Mask Mandates to combat COVID-19**

In Nassau County in 2022, newly elected Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman (R), on his first day in office, signed an executive order giving school districts and their boards of education the power to determine masking policy of their students and staff. This move by Blakeman countered New York Governor Kathy Hochul’s (D) state mandates requiring that masks be worn in schools by both students, faculty, and staff (Newsday Staff, 2022). When announcing his executive order, Blakeman said:

> Parents have a fundamental right to make health care decisions on behalf of their children... Government may not infringe upon these rights without a compelling reason. School boards are comprised of elected officials who make decisions based upon the unique circumstances of each district. They are in the best position to make these decisions, not an autocracy in Albany.

State Education Commissioner Betty Rosa countered Blakeman, saying that school districts must obey all state requirements including the face covering regulation. Jay Worona, deputy executive director and general counsel of the NYS School Board Association, said Blakeman did not have the authority to require school boards to make this decision since the state has a “superseding mandate” (Newsday Staff, 2022).

Between the politicization of mask policy and curriculum reforms surrounding diversity and inclusion content, school boards on Long Island are presented with a new set of challenges. On these issues, interest groups like Long Island Loud Majority, along with the potential rise of
policy entrepreneurs are coming to the surface. Their stories should be told in future research. How school districts and their boards handle these developments needs to be followed and analyzed. The impacts of these recent concerns across Long Island on school elections remains to be seen.

*Has Whole Child Theory Reform been Promoted throughout the Pandemic?*

In this study, Whole Child Theory reform presented itself as a backstory behind the larger story of the political impact that the Long Island Opt-Out Organization had on the four districts. Some Whole Child Theory reforms were present in districts because district leadership believed such reforms were of value to students. Now, two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, future researchers might investigate whether school districts adopted more Whole Child reforms to deal with negative social, emotional, and physical impact of the pandemic on students. The inability to interact with one another in school and outside of school during the initial stages of the pandemic precluded much of the movement education and play-based learning concepts of Whole Child Theory that were mentioned by the interviewees in this dissertation. A question for future research is: Will Whole Child Theory see a new awakening in K-12 schools on Long Island?

*Expanding Research and Analysis Beyond Long Island to regions across New York State*

Long Island has been the epicenter, or “opt-out stronghold” as the *New York Times* said, of the Long Island Opt-Out Movement. Is it the epicenter of increased political activism in school district politics in New York State? When thinking about the scope of this study, the Long Island Opt-Out Movement was centralized in largely white, middle-class communities throughout Nassau and Suffolk counties. However, was this the case throughout New York
State? Future researchers should consider examining how the greater Opt-Out Movement against standardized testing measures played a role in school board politics in regions throughout New York, like the Capital Region, Hudson Valley, and North Country. Are similar patterns seen in these regions where white, middle-class school communities were opting out at larger rates than minority-majority communities or districts with significant populations of students of color? In many circumstances, the research questions for this dissertation apply to future research in districts throughout New York State. How did anti-Common Core or pro-Opt-Out candidates’ fare against incumbents? Were there local interest groups that emerged in these communities based on this issue? What role did Whole Child Theory reform play in elections and on the policy agenda?

**COVID-19 Regulations as Universal Impacts in the United States**

Finally, as it is suggested that future researchers examine the emergence of political activism surrounding mask mandates and COVID-19 vaccine mandates in school district communities on Long Island, it is important to differentiate dynamics of the above discussed COVID-19 issues from this study’s examination of standardized testing mandates and the rise in political activism on standardized tests. This study was limited in focus on school districts with similar socioeconomic indicators, opt-out rates, and school district board member turnover like School Districts A, B, C, and D. This is not the case for how COVID-19 impacted school districts across Long Island, New York State, and the United States. Being mindful that states and localities had different approaches to combatting COVID-19's spread and/or its impact on the well-being of students, a future study examining how these approaches provoked political activism at school board meetings, on social media, and in school elections would be useful.
Table 5.2 Summary of Recommendations for Future Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inquiries for Future Research</th>
<th>Prospective Research and Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are the ethical dilemmas noted by School Districts A and B common in other districts?</td>
<td>Research other districts in New York State to identify any patterns or similarities that these cases brought to attention in this study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does the history of opt-out politics and activism on Long Island compare to other regions in New York State?</td>
<td>Compare and contrast Opt-Out politics in school districts in New York State.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has Whole Child Theory reform been promoted throughout the pandemic?</td>
<td>The pandemic dampened efforts to promote socialization and movement during the school day. Whole Child Theory may be a leading theory for school districts to implement as the pandemic wanes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do emerging Long Island interest groups in school district elections impact the political, electoral, and policy agendas of school districts in the next several years?</td>
<td>Examine Long Island Loud Majority, unions, Moms for Liberty, and other interest groups and how they develop as political juggernauts or eventual policy entrepreneurs at the school district level.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

While school boards are important sites of education politics and policy, they receive much less attention in education policy research than state and federal governments. This study brought attention to local education politics and the impact school district governance has on the education of students and the greater well-being of a school district community. School districts are sites of dynamic and significant political activism among local interest groups such as the Long Island Opt-Out Organization as well as teachers unions. With social media and other resources, such groups have mobilized parents and other community members to enter the political arena and be active stakeholders in school district politics.

This study also added a political science perspective to research on the Long Island Opt-Out Movement. The most prominent political actor in this movement, the Long Island Opt-Out
Organization, has sought and gained influence as an electoral power broker in school districts throughout Long Island. An endorsement and support from the Long Island Opt-Out Organization aided school board candidates in their races and boosted their chances of securing a seat on a school board. The influence of the Long Island Opt-Out Organization and that of teachers unions continues in K-12 politics on Long Island.

District administration and school boards faced challenges when it came to opt-out decision making, messaging to parents, and pushes by community advocates for Whole Child Theory reforms to be instituted in the classroom. Today, district administration and school boards face new waves of activism at their board meetings and during their election seasons as changes to curriculum and health mandates continue to ignite intense debate and divide communities.

For educational researchers, practitioners, or stakeholders, this study provided insight into political and policy developments in Long Island school districts during 2014-2019. In many ways, the Long Island Opt-Out Movement was the beginning of organized political forces other than teachers unions involving themselves in school elections, rarely seen in the region prior to this time period. Their example may provide lessons and inspiration for future political activism on other issues involving K-12 schools. This study also shared the stories of career educators and citizen school board members who work each day for the betterment of their communities, schools, and children. Their dedication and continued service aimed at improving the lives of children creates hopeful promise that good, efficient, and effective educational policy and advocacy will continue to serve the next generation of students in Long Island K-12 public schools.
Appendices

Appendix A: Informed Consent Document, sent via email

Study Title: The Long Island Opt-Out Movement and Local Politics in Four School Districts

Investigator Name: Raymond Webb

Investigator Email Contact: rwebb@albany.edu

Dissertation Advisor: Professor Sandra Vergari, svergari@albany.edu

Your participation in this research is voluntary and confidential. You are not obligated to participate and may decline to answer any question. Only I will know your identity for this project. Your identity and the identity of your school district will not be revealed in the dissertation or subsequent publications.

I will be pleased to share the final dissertation with you.

If you have any questions about this study or your participation, please contact me at rwebb@albany.edu.
Appendix B: Sample Interview Questions

Preface: I am studying several Long Island school districts. I want to gain a better understanding of school board election, politics, interest groups, and policy priorities. My focus is on school board elections from 2014-2019 and board policies from 2014 to today. To begin, I want to ask about school board election campaigns.

RQ1

1. Prominent Issues in School Board Campaigns
   a. For a school board member/candidate- When you ran for school board, what were the major issues discussed during your campaign and why?
   b. For school district administrator- In the school board race(s) you’ve witnessed, what issues received the most attention and why? Are there any issues that were prominent in more than one school board election cycle (2014-2019)?
   c. For other interviewees such as an opt-out activist, parent, voter, teacher- In the school board race(s) you’ve witnessed what issues received the most attention and why? Are there any issues that were prominent in more than one school board election cycle (2014-2019)?

2. Whole Child Theory- The leading curriculum reform that opt-out activists advocate for implementation in K-12 schools. It seeks to provide different methods to student learning than through testing, including social-emotional learning.
   a. For school district administrator- If applicable, when and why did the Whole Child Theory start to be a topic of discussion in your school district? Who promoted this approach?
      i. Has your district implemented any elements of the Whole Child Theory? Why or why not?
   b. For a school board member/candidate- Did your campaign support the Whole Child Theory? Why or why not?
      i. Do you currently support or oppose application of this theory in your school district? Why or why not?
   c. For other interviewees such as opt-out activists- Is Whole Child Theory important in this district? Why or why not?

RQ2

1. Analysis of John Kingdon
   a. For a school administrator, school board member/candidate, & other interviewees- Policy entrepreneurs in school politics are like business entrepreneurs in the private sector. Policy entrepreneurs invest substantial time, energy, and resources into promoting a particular policy or course of action. Have there been any policy entrepreneurs in recent school board races in your district- people who stood out for passionately advocating a particular policy or action? If so, whom and what was their agenda?
RQ3

1. **Understanding the Candidates**
   a. For a school administrator, school board member/candidate, & other interviewees- Reflecting on the 2014-2019 school board races for your district, do you recall any pro or anti Opt-Out Movement candidates?
   b. For a school administrator, school board member/candidate, & other interviewees- Reflecting on the 2014-2019 school board races for your district, do you recall any candidates who favored or opposed Whole Child Theory?

2. **Dissecting the Results**
   a. For a school administrator, school board member/candidate, & other interviewees- Reflecting on the 2014-2019 school board races for your district, have your incumbent board members that sought re-election win their seats against competitors?
   b. For a school administrator, school board member/candidate, & other interviewees- How have challengers fared against board incumbents?
   c. For a school administrator, school board member/candidate, & other interviewees- In open seat races, have there been any patterns in the types of candidates who win the seats? For example, were advocates of opt-out and Whole Child Theory more likely to win open seats than others?
   d. For a school administrator, school board member/candidate, & other interviewees- Have you noticed any patterns in races where challengers defeated incumbents?

*Questions A & B will be supported by existing school district results data provided by *Newsday* for races between 2014-2019.

RQ4

1. **Focusing Events**
   a. Evaluating your district’s school board elections from 2014-2019, were you surprised at any of the results?

2. **Agenda Setting**
   a. After a new board member was sworn in, did policy agendas shift over towards more pro- or anti- opt-out thinking and/or to advance the Whole Child Theory? Or has the curriculum agenda of your district been consistent over the years, no matter the individuals serving on the school board?

All interviews will end with the following two questions:

1. Is there anything else you would like to share about the Long Island Opt-Out Movement, school board politics, and policy in your school district?
2. Is there anyone else whom you recommend I interview for this project?
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