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Factors Influencing Student Participation in the Utah Aspire Plus

Prepared by the
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THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
UTAH EDUCATION POLICY CENTER

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Executive Summary

The Utah Aspire Plus is an annual assessment of reading, English language arts, math, and science administered to Utah public school students in grades 9 and 10. The Utah State Board of Education contracted with the Utah Education Policy Center to study possible causes of the decline in Utah Aspire Plus participation, including causes related to the "perceived and realized value" of the assessment to students, parents, and educators, and to recommend changes that might improve participation.

Research Questions

1. Which student- and school-level factors predict whether a student will participate in the Utah Aspire Plus?
2. What are administrators', teachers', parents', and students' beliefs, attitudes, and observations about the Utah Aspire Plus?
3. What are some potential actions that could increase participation in the Utah Aspire Plus?

Report Organization

Section 1: Introduction. This section provides background on the Utah Aspire Plus, some historical context of standardized assessment of students, and previous research on attitudes toward standardized assessment.
Section 2: Methods. This section gives details about the data sources and analysis techniques used for this report.
Section 3: Predictors of participation. This section provides details of a statistical analysis of participation using the Utah statewide longitudinal database.
Section 4: Views of the Utah Aspire Plus. This section discusses the results of surveys and interviews with students, parents, teachers, assessment coordinators, and school administrators.
Section 5: Opting Out. This section focuses on an important influence on participation rates that emerged from both the statistical analysis and surveys and interviews: parents opting their students out of assessment.
Section 6: Considerations. This section reviews the key findings from this report and offers suggestions for how participation rates might be improved.

Key Findings

Our analysis suggests that the three most important factors related to the declining rate of participation in the Utah Aspire Plus (UA+) are 1) Rising opt-out rates; 2) Attending an online school; and 3) Chronic absenteeism. Although our survey and interview samples are small and non-representative (*n* = 155), opinions gathered suggest several concerns that are likely related to non-participation, including concerns about the validity and utility of the UA+, the impact of the UA+ on instruction, and concerns distinctive to online schools. We recommend several approaches that may bolster participation, including advocating for assessment, emphasizing collective benefits, reconsidering the design of the science section of the UA+, reconsidering the eligibility of online home-school students, and expanding the accessibility of remote online administration for students attending online schools. It is important to note that while our report touches upon *perceptions* regarding the UA+'s validity and alignment to state standards, we provide no direct evidence on these topics and instead refer the interested reader to the UA+ technical reports.[1]

[1] https://schools.utah.gov/assessment/_assessment_/_resources_/_technical_reports_/22_UAPlusTechnicalReport.pdf

1 | Introduction

The Utah Aspire Plus (UA+) is an annual assessment of reading, English language arts, math, and science administered to Utah public school students in grades 9 and 10. The Utah State Board of Education (USBE) contracted with the Utah Education Policy Center (UEPC) to study possible causes of the decline in UA+ participation, including the "perceived and realized value" of the assessment to students, parents, and educators, and to recommend changes that might improve participation. The goals of the proposed project are to provide information to improve the USBE's understanding of why participation rates have declined and to recommend ways to increase participation. These goals will be achieved by answering the following research questions.

1. Which student- and school-level factors predict whether a student will participate in the UA+?
2. What are administrators', teachers', parents', and students' beliefs, attitudes, and observations about the UA+?
3. What are some potential actions that could increase participation in the UA+?

UA+ Background

The Utah State Board of Education is responsible for administering assessments to measure student academic achievement and student growth in Utah.[2] Utah State statute 53E-4-304 required the USBE to adopt a high school assessment that:

> (a) is predictive of a student's college readiness as measured by the college readiness assessment described in Section 53E-4-305; and
>
> (b) provides a growth score for a student from grade 9 to 10.[3]

Local Education Agencies (LEAs) are required to administer the adopted assessment to all students in grades 9 and 10.[4] The USBE adopted the UA+ in 2019 for this purpose. The UA+ assessment replaced the SAGE (Student Assessment of Growth and Excellence) for high school students.[5]

The UA+ is referred to as a hybrid assessment as it combines items from the ACT Aspire, a national standardized assessment for students in grades 3-10 administered by Pearson Education, and items generated to assess Utah Core Standards. Unlike the SAGE, the UA+ is not course-based (designed to assess specific courses) but rather grade-based (designed to assess students in specific grades). The UA+ was developed through a collaboration among the Utah State Board of Education, Utah educators, and Pearson Education.

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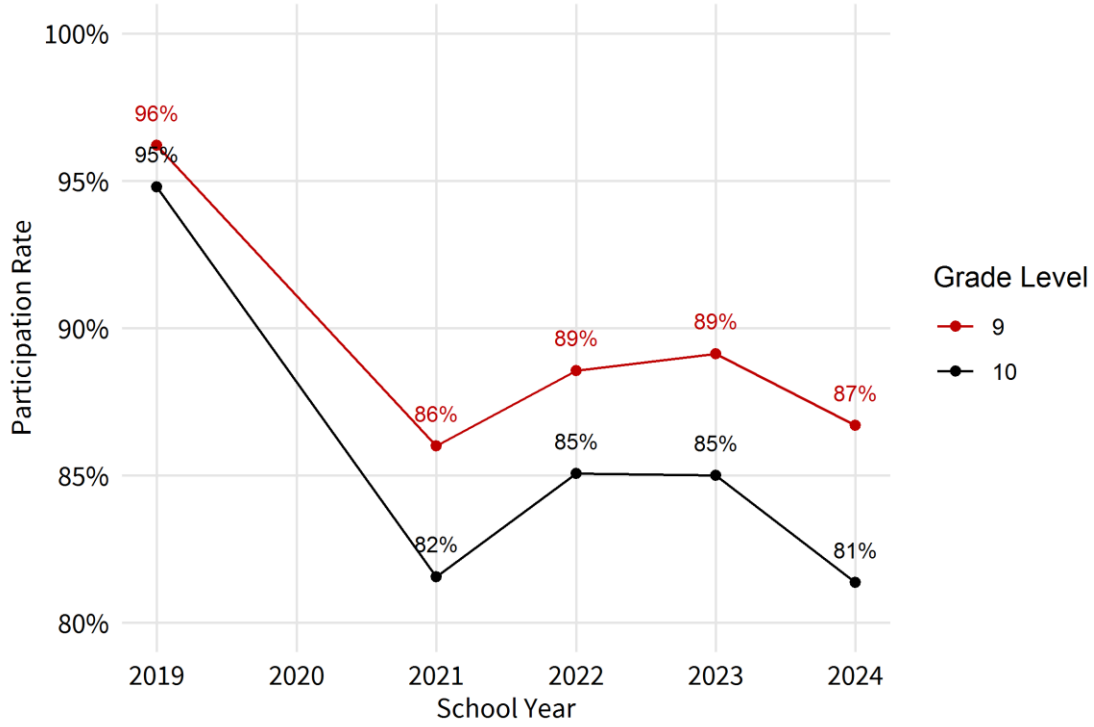
[2] See Utah Code 53E-5-2.
[3] See Utah Code 53E-4-304.
[4] Utah's assessment requirements are consistent with the 2015 *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) reauthorization to the 1965 *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA), which requires assessments in English, math, and science at least once while a student is in grades 9 through 12.
[5] SAGE was administered to students in grades 3-11.

Utah students take the UA+ through a computer-based platform and typically complete all four sections in a single day with short breaks between sections. The English, math, reading, and science sections are 45, 75, 75, and 60 minutes long, respectively.[6] Prior to 2024, the Utah Aspire Plus was administered only to students in-person at their school. In Spring 2024, online remote testing was permitted. According to the UA+ 2023-2024 Technical Report[7], students who received 100% of their learning online and who did not require a paper test (e.g., in Braille) were eligible to participate in online administration of the assessment.

Declining Utah Aspire Plus Participation

Student participation rates in the UA+ have fallen since its introduction in the 2018-19 school year, as shown below in Figure 1[8].

Figure 1. Utah Aspire Plus Participation Rate, 2019-2024



Note: The Utah Aspire Plus was not administered in the 2019-20 school year as a result of the passage of Senate Bill 3005, which waived statutory requirements for assessments that had not been administered before school closures in March 2020.

[6] See https://www.schools.utah.gov/assessment/assessments.
[7] "Utah Aspire Plus 2023-2024 Technical Report" https://schools.utah.gov/assessment/_assessment_/_resources_/_technical_reports_/23_UAPlus_TechnicalReport.pdf (page 28)
[8] Rushing, M. (2024). Assessment data specialist, Utah State Board of Education. Personal Communication, 11/26/2024. In this and all figures, we follow the USBE date format convention of listing the school year as it was in the *spring* of that school year, when testing took place, rather than in the fall of the school year.

From 2019 to 2024, the rate of participation among 9th graders fell from 96% to 87%, while the participation rate for 10th graders fell from 95% to 81%. Figure 1 shows that the steepest decline was between 2019 and 2021, or from the year immediately before the March 2020 shutdown of school buildings during the COVID-19 pandemic to the year immediately following. Since 2021, participation rates have remained relatively stable.

Problems Arising from Low Participation Rates

Low participation rates on assessments pose several challenges for providing accurate reports of student achievement. First, low participation rates artificially deflate the rate of reported proficiency, making it appear that student performance is declining when it may, in fact, be constant or even increasing. This is because the USBE Consolidated Plan stipulates that the reported percentage of students who are identified as "proficient" is calculated using a denominator that cannot be less than 95% of the number of enrolled students.[9] Assuming that there are 100 students, 80% participate, and 60% of those participants are proficient, you would obtain 80 scores, and 48 of those scores (60% of 80) would indicate proficiency. However, the Consolidated Plan requires that the denominator cannot be less than 95% of the number of enrolled students. Thus, instead of dividing 48 by 80, you must divide 48 by 95, obtaining a reported proficiency rate of 51%, which is nine percentage points lower than the "actual" proficiency rate. If only 50 of 100 students participated and 60% of those students were proficient, you will have 30 proficient students (60% of 50) divided by the same denominator – 95 – and obtain a reported proficiency rate of only 32%. Eventually, the divergence between the "actual" and "reported" proficiency rates will become so large that public confidence in reported proficiency rates will decline, undermining their use as indicators.

Another problem with low participation rates is that non-participation is typically not random. This sets the stage for non-participation to introduce a systematic bias in reported proficiency rates due to the distinctive populations of students who are not participating[10]. If lower-scoring students don't participate, then the proficiency estimates will be biased upward, overestimating the true value for the total population of students. If higher-scoring students don't participate, then proficiency estimates will be biased downward, underestimating the population value. Combining these sources of bias with the potential for participation rates to fluctuate over time means that consumers of proficiency rate information will struggle to make valid comparisons or reliably detect upward or downward trends.

Reduced public confidence in school- and state-level measures of student learning is especially concerning to communities that have historically been underserved. A joint statement by 12 organizations, including the NAACP, the National Urban League, and the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, makes the case that reliable assessment of student learning is a civil rights issue:

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[9] Revised State Template for the Consolidated State Plan. Downloaded November 22, 2024 from https://schools.utah.gov/eseastateinitiatives/_esea_state_initiatives_/_essa_/2023%20August%20Utah%20ESEA%20Revised%20Plan%20CLEAN%203-1.pdf

[10] McLaughlin, D., Scarloss, B., Stancavage, F., & Blankenship, C. (2005). Using state assessments to impute achievement of students absent from NAEP: An empirical study in four states. *Technical report for the NAEP Validity Studies Panel.* Available online at https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED506846.pdf

> …we rely on the consistent, accurate, and reliable data provided by annual statewide assessments to advocate for better lives and outcomes for our children. These data are critical for understanding whether and where there is equal opportunity…**we cannot fix what we cannot measure**. (Leadership Conference, 2015, emphasis added)

Attitudes Toward Standardized Assessment of Student Learning

To understand attitudes toward standardized assessment of student learning, it is helpful to briefly review some watershed moments in the history of learning assessment in the U.S. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 required annual evaluation of educational effectiveness in order to receive federal funding under Title 1. Early design and implementation of evaluation methods and assessments were "chaotically diverse" through the 1970s.[11] Not until 1994, when ESEA was reauthorized as the 1994 Improving America's School Act, were states required to develop performance standards and align their assessments to those standards. The 2002 reauthorization, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, added new stipulations for assessment, including evaluating schools based on student performance on standardized assessments of reading, math, and science.[12] There were reports that these high stakes led many schools to narrow their curriculum to focus on the subjects covered by the assessment at the expense of art, music, and other subjects that the tests did not cover.[13] In 2015, the ESEA reauthorization, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), gave states more flexibility in designing testing but maintained standards-based accountability. According to ESSA, students in grades 3-8 are required to be tested every year, but the requirement to assess students in grades 9-12 only once during that period in reading, English language arts, mathematics, and science has remained since 1994.[14]

In the same year that ESSA was passed, three events occurred that had a dramatic negative impact on educator, policymaker, and public attitudes toward standardized assessment of student learning. First, a multi-year effort to elevate curriculum standards and to coordinate those standards across states culminated in the introduction of the "Common Core" curriculum. The Common Core was viewed as more difficult than the curricula formerly used by most states[15]. Some critics saw the Common Core standards as symbolic of federal government overreach and saw a national assessment program as a threat to student privacy.[16] Second, the federal government offered generous incentives for states to simultaneously adopt the Common Core and a new set of assessments aligned with that curriculum. The new assessments reflected the higher standards and resulted in a decrease in the percentage of students who were identified as "proficient" in the subject areas measured by the assessment. Third, many states linked their formal evaluations of teachers (for raises and promotions)

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[11] Cronbach, L., J., Ambron, S. R., Dornbusch, S. M., Hess, R. D., Hornik, R. C., Phillips, D. C., et al. (1980). *Toward reform of program evaluation: Aims, methods, and institutional arrangements*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass. pg. 33.
[12] Bennett, R.E. (2016). Opt Out: An Examination of Issues. *ETS Research Report Series, 2016*: 1-16. https://doi.org/10.1002/ets2.12101
[13] Koretz, D. (2008). *Measuring up: What educational testing really tells us*. Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1503gxj
[14] https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essaassessmentfactsheet1207.pdf
[15] Bennett, R.E. (2016).
[16] Jochim, A., and McGuinn, P. (2016). The Politics of the Common Core Assessments: Why states are quitting the PARCC and Smarter Balanced testing consortia. *Education Next, 16*(4), 44-52.

to the performance of their students on the new assessments. The curriculum and the assessments were so new that many teachers felt the new tests were an unfair assessment of students, themselves, and schools. Moreover, many teachers opposed being held accountable (e.g., for raises or promotion) for their students' performance. A 2014 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll found that while 76% of teachers supported the Common Core, 91% opposed the use of test scores to evaluate teachers. The conjunction of higher standards, an unfamiliar curriculum, and high-stakes teacher evaluations led to organized opposition by parents and teachers: "2015 was the year of the opt out".[17]

The Opt-Out Movement

Guided by local and national grassroots organizations such as "United Opt Out" and "Opt Out Oregon," many parents declined to allow their children to participate in standardized assessments and the 'opt-out movement' gained traction in 2015. Opposition was often concentrated in states that most strongly linked teacher evaluation to student test performance. New York State, for example, reported participation rates below 80% in 2015, over 15 percentage points below the 95% participation rate mandated by ESSA.[18] Although the immediate causes of the 2015 surge in opting out may have been the new Common Core curriculum, new assessments, and high-stakes teacher evaluations, the opt-out movement quickly adopted many of the criticisms of standardized assessments from earlier decades, such as the narrowing of the curriculum. For example, New York State Allies for Public Education said opting out was "a deliberate decision on the part of parents to show how displeased they are with the Common Core exams and the way in which these tests have *narrowed and diminished the education of their children."* [19] Surveys of parents opting their children out included reports of concerns such as stress from testing, demoralizing negative feedback being consistently delivered to students with special needs, loss of instructional time, and the diversion of education funding to businesses that administer the tests.[20]

The opt-out movement brought increased visibility and mobilization of opposition to standardized assessments. However, it is important to keep in mind that opposition to testing and opting students out of annual assessments represents a minority position. This is illustrated in a pair of nationally representative surveys conducted by *Education Next* in 2012 and 2015.[21] In 2012, 63% of their sample supported the federal requirement for annual testing, and 12% were opposed. In 2015, opposition rose to 21%, but support rose slightly as well and was at 67%. Asked specifically about their support or opposition to the opt-out movement in 2015, 59% of the sample were opposed, and only 25% were supportive.

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[17] Bennett, R.E. (2016).

[18] Bennett, R.E. (2016).

[19] Levy, S., & Edelman, J. (2016). Making sense of the opt-out movement: Education Next talks with Scott Levy and Jonah Edelman. *Education Next, 16*(4), 54+. Emphasis added. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A464163363/AONE.

[20] Eissler, T. (2015, March 29). All stick no carrot: Why my children opt-out of standardized Testing – and yours should too. *Quartz*. Retrieved from http://qz.com/367228.

[21] Henderson, M., Peterson, P., & West, M. (2015). The 2015 EdNext Poll on School Reform: Public thinking on testing, opt out, common core, unions, and more. *Education Next, 16*(1). Available online at https://www.educationnext.org/2015-ednext-poll-school-reform-opt-out-common-core-unions/.

Characteristics of Opt-Out Supporters Nationally

Research has found that the opt-out movement is led by a demographically distinctive group.[22] In a survey of 1,641 members of opt-out social media groups that was published in 2016, the sample was 92% White, 85% female, 60% with a graduate degree, and had a median income of $125,000 when the national median was $54,000.[23] A 2015 analysis of New York State opt-out data by the Brookings Institution[24] supports the view that districts with a higher percentage of opted-out students tended to be more affluent, as indicated by a lower percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. These demographic trends are not surprising to scholars of social movements, who point out that more affluent and educated parents are "more likely to have the time and money needed to participate in politics, and they also are more likely to inhabit social environments that encourage political engagement, the acquisition of political knowledge, and the cultivation of civic skills."[25]

As the "we cannot fix what we cannot measure" quote above suggests, national surveys consistently find more support for standardized assessment among groups that have historically been denied adequate education. Some speculate that greater support for standardized assessment occurs among Black, Hispanic, and low-income parents because the schools their students attend are more impacted by accountability testing, including the closure of low-performing schools.[26] Expressing her group's opposition to the opt-out movement, Education Trust president Kati Haycock articulated the link between assessment and accountability by saying, "Kids who are not tested end up not counting."[27] A 2020 national survey found that while only 17% of respondents who were White said that there was "not enough emphasis" on "achievement testing in the public schools in your community," this rate was significantly higher among respondents who were Black (25%) or Hispanic (32%).[28] The diverging views about the opt-out movement and standardized assessment across racial and socioeconomic lines pose a difficult challenge to school administrators who wish to protect the interests of all students.

Opt-Out Policies in Utah

In April 2014, then Utah governor Gary Herbert signed the Parental Rights in Public Education bill (Senate Bill 122) into law. Senate Bill 122 granted parents and guardians the right to excuse their

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[22] Strauss, V. (16 November, 2013). The Answer Sheet blog. The Washington Post, online edition.
[23] Pizmony-Levy, O., & Saraisky, N. G. (2016). Who opts out and why? Results from a national survey on opting out of standardized tests (pp. 1-64). New York, NY: Columbia University.
[24] Chingos, M. (2015). Who opts out of state tests? (Brookings Brown Center Chalkboard No. 115). https://www.brookings.edu/research/who-opts-out-of-state-tests/.
[25] Casalaspi, D. (2022). Equality, inclusion, and the opt-out movement: Who chooses to opt out? *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 30* (136), 1-29.
[26] Pondiscio, R. (March 25, 2015). Opting out, race, and reform. Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Available online at https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/opting-out-race-and-reform
[27] Helfling, K. (Jan 12, 2015). Education secretary says rolling back 'No Child Left Behind' testing would deprive students. *Associated Press.* Available online at https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/education-secretary-arne-duncan-says-favors-annual-testing
[28] PDK Poll. "Public School Priorities in a Political Year" (September 2020). *PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools*.

student "from taking a test that is administered statewide."[29] In March 2015, Senate Bill 204 amended the Parental Rights in Public Education law to include the ability for parents to opt their children out of a broader array of federal and state assessments and prohibited administrators from requiring a meeting to excuse the student from testing or from rewarding students who participate in testing.[30] The current state code articulating parental rights with regard to excusing students from assessment is Title 53G, Chapter 6, Section 803(9).[31] The code stipulates that the opt-out procedure must not place an undue burden on a parent and may be completed online. The state continues to navigate the tension between a desire to respect parental prerogative and to use assessment to improve student learning.

The Purpose of Standardized Statewide Assessment

Standardized statewide assessment of student learning serves multiple goals. At the student level, feedback can alert students and parents when a student is struggling in a particular domain so that they can seek additional support. For teachers, end-of-year assessments are not timed to enable changes to personalized instruction, but feedback at the student level can still inform advice that teachers provide to students with regard to appropriate future classes. Moreover, end-of-year assessments can be used to inform changes to instruction for the next year with the goal of improving student outcomes.

As discussed in the *Standard Test Administration and Testing Ethics Policy for Utah Educators* (2024)[32], assessments are also used for evaluation at the program and school levels. By permitting a statewide context, standardized assessments enable administrators to identify both schools or programs that need additional resources and support and also potential sites for learning about effective practices. Standardized statewide assessments provide "the only comparable measures of performance at the building [i.e., school] level"[33] that are aligned with state standards and that disaggregate by demographic group. Without this information, it would be difficult to know whether a particular school was struggling to meet state standards for student learning, and it would be difficult to know whether particular student groups in that school needed additional support.

School-level performance indicators, including performance averages on standardized assessments, may be seen as informative for parents who want to exercise school choice options in where to send their students. This "informed consumer" theory of school-level assessment is consistent with a market-based approach to improving schools, in which parents move their students to better-performing schools and thus reward those schools with state support based on enrollment. However, a 2019 national survey of parents found that only 23% of parents used state-issued report cards to assess the quality of their child's school,[34] suggesting that consumers may not be sufficiently informed to exert the kind of corrective forces required by the market-based approach.

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[29] https://le.utah.gov/~2014/bills/static/SB0122.html
[30] https://le.utah.gov/~2015/bills/static/SB0204.html
[31] https://le.utah.gov/xcode/Title53G/Chapter6/53G-6-S803.html
[32] https://schools.utah.gov/assessment/_assessment_/_testing_ethics_/24_TestingEthicsPolicyApprovedApril24.pdf
[33] Bennett, R. E. (June, 2016). Opt out: An examination of issues. *ETS Research Report Series,* No. RR-16-13. doi:10.1002/ets2.12101.
[34] PDK Poll. "Frustration in the Schools: Teachers speak out on pay, funding, and feeling valued" (September 2019). *PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools*.

Research Questions

The goals of the proposed project are to provide information to improve the USBE's understanding of why participation rates in the Utah Aspire Plus (UA+) have declined and to recommend ways to increase participation. These goals were addressed by answering the following research questions.

1. Which student- and school-level factors predict whether a student will participate in the Utah Aspire Plus (UA+)?
2. What are administrators', teachers', parents', and students' beliefs, attitudes, and observations about the UA+?
3. What are some potential actions that could increase participation in the UA+?

The methods used to address these questions are discussed in the next section. It is worth noting that our methods are not designed to directly evaluate the UA+'s validity or alignment with state standards. Those questions are better addressed by the UA+ technical reports.[35]

[35] https://schools.utah.gov/assessment/_assessment_/_resources_/_technical_reports_/22_UAPlusTechnicalReport.pdf

2 | Methods

To answer the three research questions introduced at the end of the last section, we employed several data collection strategies, described in detail below.

Quantitative Analysis of Statewide Longitudinal Data

Using student-level data available through a Master Data Sharing Agreement with the USBE[36], the UEPC constructed a data set of all students enrolled in public schools in Utah in the 2019, 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024 school years who were in grades 4 through 10[37]. This data set included student demographics, including race and ethnicity, gender, eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch, English language learner status, chronic absenteeism, receipt of special education services, assessment participation and score for the current and prior year, and GPA. Any students who were ineligible to participate in standardized state assessments were excluded from the dataset. School-level data (i.e., enrollment size, Title I status, online school status, charter school status, and the population density of the school's location) were joined with student-level records.

The UEPC used that dataset to perform multilevel logistic regression[38] with the goal of estimating the relationship of each of the above student and school-level factors to the probability of a student participating in standardized assessment. In addition to testing whether each of the student and school factors is "significantly" related to participation (i.e., whether the strength of the relationship between a predictor variable and participation observed in the data is unlikely to be due to chance), the regression models also describe the relative magnitude of the relationships. In addition to offering insights into demographic and school-level factors related to Utah Aspire Plus (UA+) participation, this quantitative approach uses population-level data (all students in public schools) rather than a sample, thus improving confidence that results from this approach are representative of Utah students.

Surveys and Interviews

In this section, we first discuss our methods for conducting surveys and interviews and then discuss our process for gathering the sample who participated.

Surveys

Surveys of teachers, parents, students, and school assessment coordinators (SACs) were designed to inform an understanding of the reasons for non-participation and declining participation. The surveys were brief and included a combination of Likert scale, multiple choice, and open-ended questions. While the specific question wording for each survey is included in Appendix E, Table 1 provides an

[36] The UEPC follows all federal and state protocols for data privacy, security, and reporting in research and evaluation studies.
[37] Grade levels below 9 were included to examine whether the decline from grades covered by the RISE (3-8) to grades covered by UA+ (9-10) were part of a general negative trend across grade level or a discontinuity.
[38] Logistic regression is appropriate when the outcome is a binary variable (taking only two values: participated in UA+ or not) and multilevel regression is necessary because it accounts for the complex relationships between variables at both the student (e.g., English learner) and school (e.g., percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) levels. For more information on our analyses, see Appendix C.

overview of the type of questions that were included in each survey. Where appropriate, the surveys were intentionally designed to have overlap in question constructs across the respondent groups to identify similarities or discrepancies across groups. In addition to the questions shown in Table 1, all survey respondents completed an initial informed consent form before completing the survey. Additionally, some surveys included screening questions to ensure that respondents were the intended targeted groups (e.g., students in 10th or 11th grade who would have been eligible to participate in UA+ in the previous year, or parents of these students).

Table 1. Surveys

Question Type	Question Construct (wording varies by survey)	SAC Survey	Teacher Survey	Parent Survey	Student Survey
Likert Scale Response options: *Strongly Disagree* *Slightly Disagree* *Slightly Agree* *Strongly Agree*	Says something about a school's quality	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Reflects quality of students' learning	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Evaluates content-specific knowledge	✓	✓	✓	
	Helps state identify schools needing improvement	✓	✓	✓	
	Helps teachers assess student learning	✓	✓	✓	
	Helps identify achievement gaps in students	✓	✓	✓	✓
	UA+ is too stressful for students	✓	✓	✓	
	Standardized testing is stressful				✓
	Takes up too much instructional time	✓	✓	✓	
	Makes schools too focused on tested subjects	✓	✓	✓	
	Diverts money from schools to testing businesses	✓	✓	✓	
	Puts private student data at risk	✓	✓	✓	
	I try my best when taking standardized testing				✓
	Using results to inform teaching		✓		
	Results help to understand student's learning			✓	
	I talk with students about their results		✓	✓	
	Intentions for student to take the test this school year			✓	✓
Multiple Choice	School/District attendance policy for students not taking the test	✓			
	Efforts made for students absent during testing	✓			
Open Ended	Other ways you use the results		✓		
	Policies/structural factors that reduce participation	✓			
	What else would be helpful for USBE to know	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Reasons why students will not take the test this year			✓	✓

Note: SAC = School Assessment Coordinators.

Open-ended survey responses were analyzed in conjunction with the interview transcripts, which together formed the corpus of qualitative data. More specific information about the analyses of these data is provided in the section below on "Interviews."

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were designed for school administrators and for parents who opted their child out of the UA+. All interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes. An informed consent form was signed by all participants in advance of the interview, and key tenets of informed consent were reviewed verbally before the interview began. The interview protocol for parents included questions about why they decided to opt their children out of the assessment and what their school, district, and/or state could do to improve student participation in the UA+. The interview protocol for administrators asked administrators about their perceptions of why parents opt their children out of the assessment, whether they have noticed any trends related to participation, and suggestions for increasing participation in the UA+. Interview protocols are provided below in Appendix D.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions and open-ended survey responses were coded inductively in ATLAS.ti using an open, or initial, coding approach.[39] Codes were then analyzed and grouped into categories, which formed the basis of the themes identified in the results.

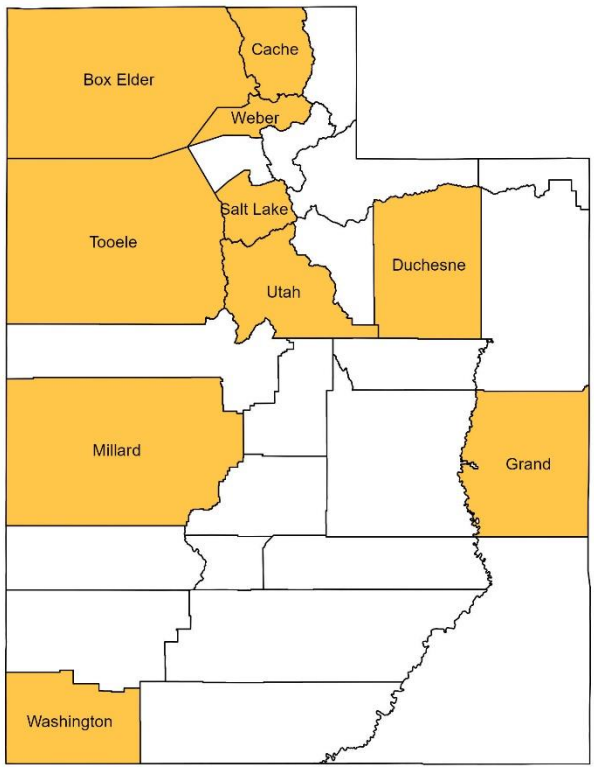
Selecting Schools

Thirteen schools were selected for surveys and interviews based on several criteria, including geographic distribution across the state (especially the inclusion of some schools off the population-dense Wasatch Front), rates of participation on the UA+ that represent both typical and unusually low levels and rates of parental opt-out that represent both typical and unusually high levels. Our preliminary analysis indicated that an important factor in non-participation and in rates of parents opting their children out of standardized assessment was whether a school was online. To find out more about this important contextual variable, we selected three online schools among our sample of thirteen schools for participation in the surveys and interviews. The counties the schools reside in are displayed in Figure 2.[40]

[39] Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
Saldana, J. (2021). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Limited.

[40] We did not display the school's specific locations to maintain anonymity.

Figure 2. County Locations of Schools Selected for Surveys and Interviews



Sampling Principals and School Assessment Coordinators

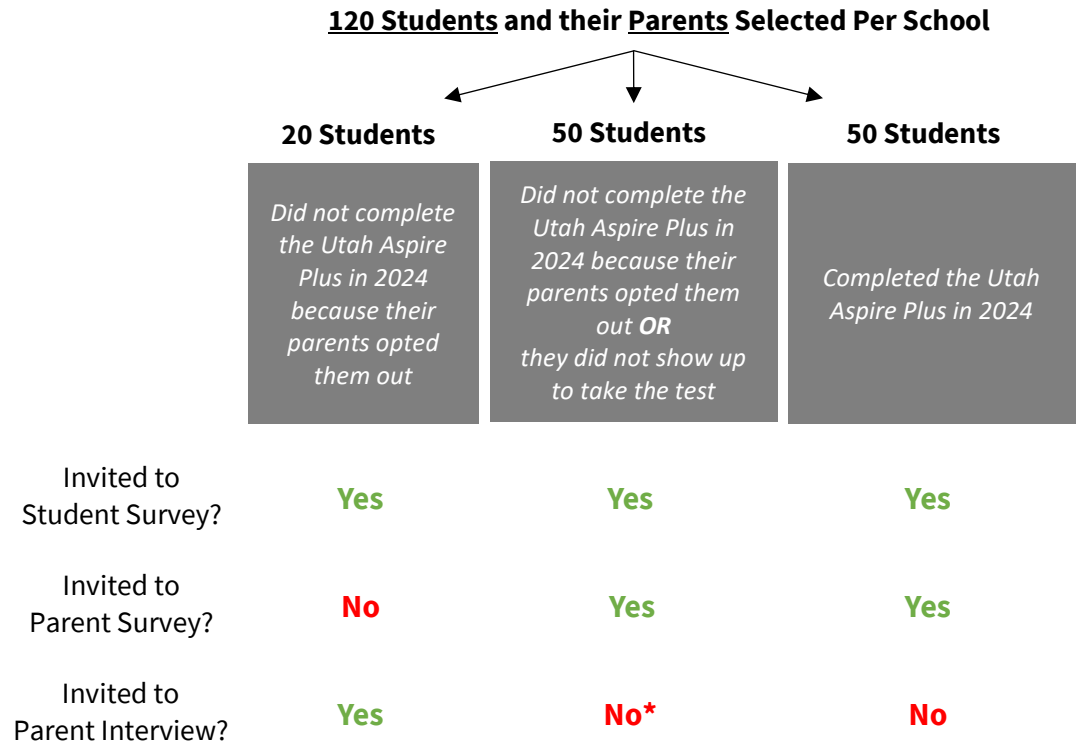
Assistant Superintendent Darin Nielsen reached out to district assessment coordinators at each of the 13 selected schools, introducing them to the study and to the UEPC. From those contacts, the UEPC obtained the names and email addresses of principals and school-level assessment coordinators. The UEPC coordinated with both district assessment coordinators and school principals to ensure that the correct individuals who were responsible for assessment coordination at each school were invited to complete the school assessment coordinator survey. One set of survey items given to assessment coordinators asked them to report what they believed *parents* at their school felt about the Utah Aspire Plus. Thus, results from the coordinators' responses should not be interpreted as their personal opinions of the assessment, but rather as their perception of parents' opinions of the assessment. School assessment coordinators were invited to complete a survey, and principals were invited to participate in a 20-minute interview.

Sampling Students and Parents

An overview of the sampling for students and parents, as well as the data collection activities to which each group was invited, is shown in Figure 3. For students and parents, a sampling frame was prepared by the UEPC using UA+ participation data from the 2023-24 school year. For each school, the target sampling frame was 120 students. The sample of 120 students was specifically intended to be comprised of the following:

- 20 students whose parents had opted them out of the UA+
- 50 more students who did not take the UA+ in 2023-24 (either because they had been opted out or they did not show up to take the assessment)
- 50 students who *did* take the UA+ in 2023-24

Figure 3. Overview of Student and Parent Sampling Frame



Note: Among each set of 50 students who did not take the Utah Aspire Plus either because they were opted out or did not show up to take the test, the parents of those who had been opted out were given a version of the survey that included the option to instead participate in a Parent Interview if they preferred. However, none of the parents who received the Parent Survey invitation opted to participate in the Parent Interview.

This sampling frame was designed to provide a balance between UA+ participants and non-participants so that differences between these two groups could be better discerned than if those groups were unbalanced. However, the response rate for these two groups proved to be very different, with a much higher response rate among students and parents of students who had participated in UA+ the previous year. As a consequence, UA+ participants comprised 75% of the student sample, and the parents of UA+ participants comprised 78% of the parent sample.[41] Within each of the three participant sample categories, students at each school were randomly selected until the expected sample threshold was met or the students in that category were exhausted. Because some schools did not have enough students in one or more of those categories, the target sample was sometimes less than 120 students. This sampling frame was shared with school personnel as a list of student names

[41] Future researchers should consider oversampling assessment non-participants to participants at a ratio of at least 4:1 if a more equal balance is desired.

and grade levels using secure file-sharing methods, and the schools provided email addresses for students in the sampling frame who were still enrolled, as well as the email addresses for one parent or guardian for each student.[42] Of the 1,079 students in the sampling frame for the ten schools that elected to participate, school personnel were able to match 837 (78%) to current emails, with some of the non-matched students having changed schools, dropped out, or moved out of state since the previous year.

Because interviews were focused on reasons why parents would opt their child out of testing, only parents whose students had been opted out in the 2023-24 school year were invited to interview. In the sampling frame, this included the parents of the up to 20 students per school who had been opted-out, as well as that portion of the up to 50 students per school who had not participated in the Utah Aspire Plus the previous year who were opted out.

In addition to gathering data from a targeted sampling frame, we also opened a version of the parent survey through the USBE's social media accounts (e.g., LinkedIn). Only seven parents of students in grades 9-11 responded to the survey. Analysis of this group's responses indicated that they tended to express stronger views than the responses from parents in the sampling frame. For example, on items where parents in the sampling frame showed general agreement, the social media sample showed even more agreement. The same is true as well for questions where parents expressed general disagreement. Open-ended responses to the survey were reviewed but did not contain any opinions that were distinct from those of parents surveyed through the sampling frame. Because of the small size of this sample and a lack of knowledge concerning its representativeness, the responses from the social media sample were not used in the figures below or quotes from surveys.

Sampling teachers

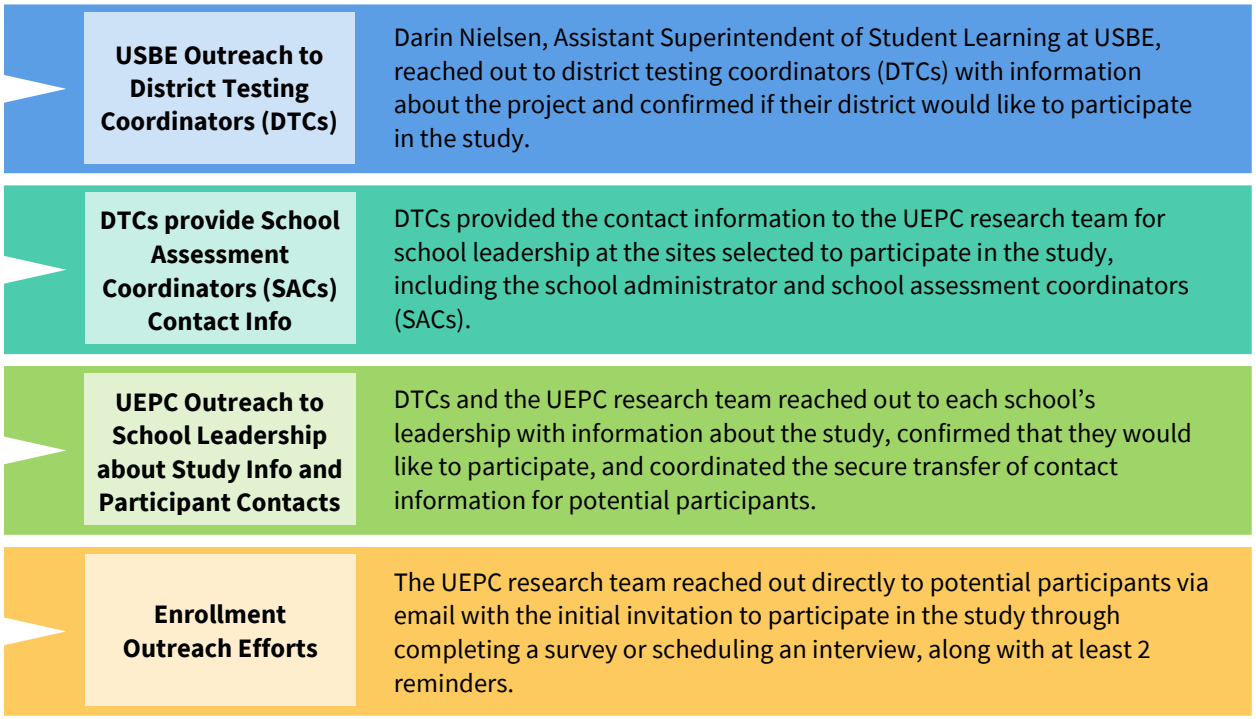
School-level assessment coordinators provided the names and email addresses of five to ten teachers at each school who worked with students in 9th or 10th grade. These teachers all taught in content areas specifically covered by the Utah Aspire Plus assessment (Reading and Language Arts, Math, and Science).

Recruitment

Figure 4 provides contextual information about how schools and participants were recruited to participate in the study. The UEPC worked in coordination with USBE to ensure that district and school leadership at the selected schools were provided thorough information about the study. Participation in the study was voluntary at both the school and the individual level. Upon district and school leadership agreement to participate in the study, the UEPC research team coordinated with school staff to directly contact participants (i.e., school staff, teachers, parents, and students). Invited participants received up to three invitations (e.g., an initial outreach with two follow-up reminders) to participate in the study.

[42] Use of student and parent emails was approved by USBE. At one school, the student email addresses provided to the UEPC were personal email addresses in contrast to the school-provided email addresses received from other schools. Rather than directly contacting students at this school using their personal email accounts, the UEPC instead offered parents the opportunity to invite their students to participate.

Figure 4. School and Participant Recruitment Process Overview



Final Sample

Table 2 provides information on the total number of invitations, participants, and response rates for participation in the surveys and interviews.

Table 2. Count of Participants for Surveys and Interviews

Data Collection Method	Total Invitations	Total Participants	Response Rate
Surveys			
Student Survey	827 (10 schools)	75 (10 schools)	9%
Parent Survey	614 (10 schools)	49 (9 schools)	8%
Teacher Survey	79 (10 schools)	14 (6 schools)	18%
Assessment Coordinator[43] Survey	10 (10 schools)	9 (9 schools)	90%
Interviews			
Parent Interviews	167 (10 schools)	3 (1 school)	2%
School Administrator Interviews	10 (10 schools)	5 (5 schools)	50%

[43] Assessment coordinators included individuals who described their main role as testing coordinator (3), assistant principal (2), principal (1), school counselor (1), librarian (1), and operations coordinator (1).

In the end, the study had participants from 10 schools. Of the 13 sites invited, one school declined to participate in the study, and responses were not received from two schools. Table 2 clarifies how many schools are represented within each group of respondents. Response rates for student and parent surveys were low, 9% and 8%, respectively. Additionally, only three parents agreed to participate in an interview, and all of them were from the same school.

The low participation rates present an important limitation of the survey and interview data. Neither the survey nor the interview samples were sufficiently robust to support definitive conclusions or be generalizable to the population of students, parents, teachers, or school administrators. While the data provide some insights into why students do or do not participate in the UA+, additional research with a representative sample would be necessary to draw generalizable conclusions.

Annual Test Observation Data

The US Department of Education requires evidence that standardized statewide assessments are monitored. Each year, the Utah State Board of Education selects a sample of sites where the state monitors the administration of Utah assessments. Seventy-five percent of these sites are randomly selected, and twenty-five percent are selected based on prior testing irregularities, low performance, or unusual student accommodations.[44] Observations of test administration are conducted by at least two USBE staff members at each site using a standardized form that asks about compliance with testing procedures and any irregularities.[45] The assessment observation data for UA+ administrations from 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years were shared with UEPC. Results from the annual test observation data are discussed in Appendix F.

[44] Utah State Board of Education Assessment and Accountability Assessment Observation Five-Year Plan. Available online at https://schools.utah.gov/assessment/_assessment_/_directors_/_observations_/AssessmentObservationPlan.pdf

[45] https://schools.utah.gov/assessment/_assessment_/_directors_/_observations_/UA_Plus_ObservationForm.pdf

3 | Predictors of Participation in the Utah Aspire Plus using Statewide Longitudinal Data

The central research question explored in this section is Research Question 1 from Section 1: "Which student- and school-level factors predict whether a student will participate in the Utah Aspire Plus (UA+)?" This question is important for understanding how student and school characteristics play a role in declining participation rates. The UEPC used enrollment data and standardized assessment data from the 2018-19 school year through the 2023-24 school year, excluding the 2019-20 school year due to the pandemic.

Participation Rate

The participation rate is equal to the number of students who participated in the UA+ assessment divided by the number of students who were eligible to participate in the UA+ assessment. Both statuses are more complex than they may appear. In short, students are **eligible** for the UA+ if they:

- are enrolled in 9th or 10th grade,
- are not a foreign exchange student,
- are taking a course that makes them eligible for one or more of the subject tests (i.e., Language, Math, and Science),
- are not eligible to complete an alternative assessment due to significant cognitive disability,
- don't have a participation code that indicates they should not be counted as eligible, and
- were enrolled for at least one day during the UA+ testing window.

Our criteria for eligibility are discussed in greater detail in Appendix A.

A student was considered to have **participated** if they were eligible, if they had at least one assessment score available, and if they did not have a "parental opt-out" participation code. Similar rules apply for assessment eligibility and participation for students in grades 4-8, but given the nature of this study, those eligibility criteria are not reviewed here.

There is an important note for all percentages reported in this section. Our participation rates, while similar to those published by USBE (i.e., typically within 5%), will not exactly match the official rates because of differences between our and their criteria for eligibility (see Appendix A) and our and their data processing methods (e.g., resolving duplicate records). Because our analysis uses not the overall rates but rather student-level records of participation, the small differences in overall rates do not affect our conclusions.[46] Please rely on the official rates of participation published by USBE whenever participation rates are to be reported.

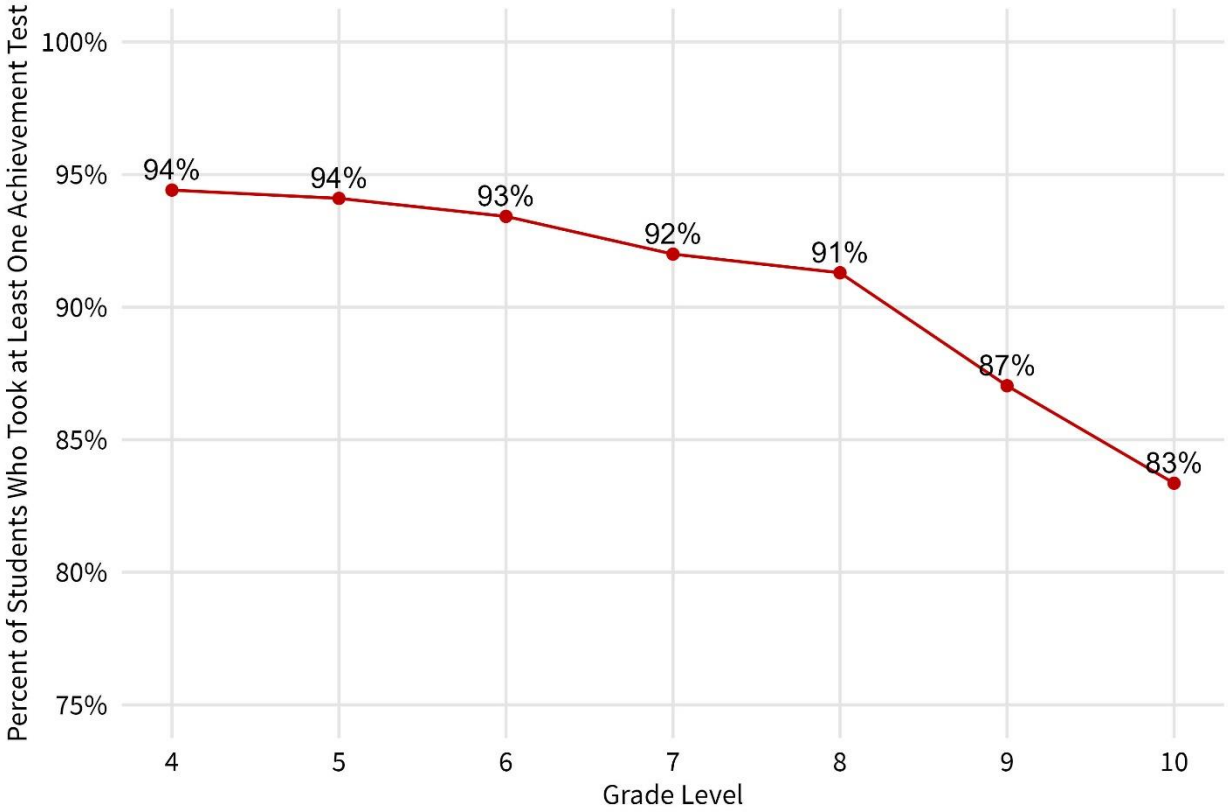
Participation in UA+ across Grade Levels

To analyze the relationship between grade level and participation rate, we assembled a dataset of all students enrolled in public schools in the state of Utah in the 2018-19 or 2020-21 to 2023-24 school

[46] These differences in methodology and study design were discussed with USBE representatives and approved prior to study completion.

years who were in grades 4-10[47] and who were eligible to participate in standardized assessments. This dataset consisted of 638,863 unique students. The participation rate by grade level, aggregated across all years, is presented in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Participation in Statewide Assessment Decreases in Higher Grades



Note. The participation rate is aggregated across 2019-2024. Methods of calculating participation rate differ from the USBE's and should not be considered official (see Appendix A).

Figure 5 shows a slow but steady decline in the participation rate for students from 4th grade to 8th grade: a loss of about 1% per year. From 8th grade to 9th grade, the decline is slightly sharper: 4%. Figure 5 aggregates across school years, but when the same figure is produced for each school year, there is little variation from the general pattern of a gradual decline in participation across grade levels.

One question the UEPC sought to understand is why participation rates on the UA+ are lower than they are on the RISE. One answer to that question is grade level: participation rates decline with grade level, and UA+ is given to students in 9th and 10th grade. However, this decline is significantly greater from 8th to 9th grade, suggesting something unique about UA+, or 9th and 10th grade, that is driving this steeper decline. Of course, this begs the question of why participation rates would decline with grade

[47] We started our examination of grade level at 4th grade because that is the first grade level when all three of the Math, Science, and English Language Arts subject assessments are administered. The participation rate for 3rd grade on Math and ELA is very similar to that for 4th grade.

level. Although it is not addressed explicitly, part of the answer to this question may lie in the next section, which explores student- and school-level variables that are statistically associated with participation.

Predictors of Participation in the UA+

To understand how student-level or school-level variables are associated with participation, we narrowed our focus to just 9th and 10th grade in case the dynamics of test participation differ from elementary to secondary grade levels. We developed a statistical model with participation as the outcome and an array of student- and school-level variables as predictors. For our analyses, a student was considered to have participated in a given year's assessment if they completed an assessment in *any* of the three UA+ subject areas (i.e., science, language arts, or math). We made this choice because the results did not meaningfully differ when we analyzed the subject areas separately. The details of the model are described in Appendix C, and the results are presented in Figure 6.

Figure 6. School- and Student-Level Predictors of Participating in the Utah Aspire Plus

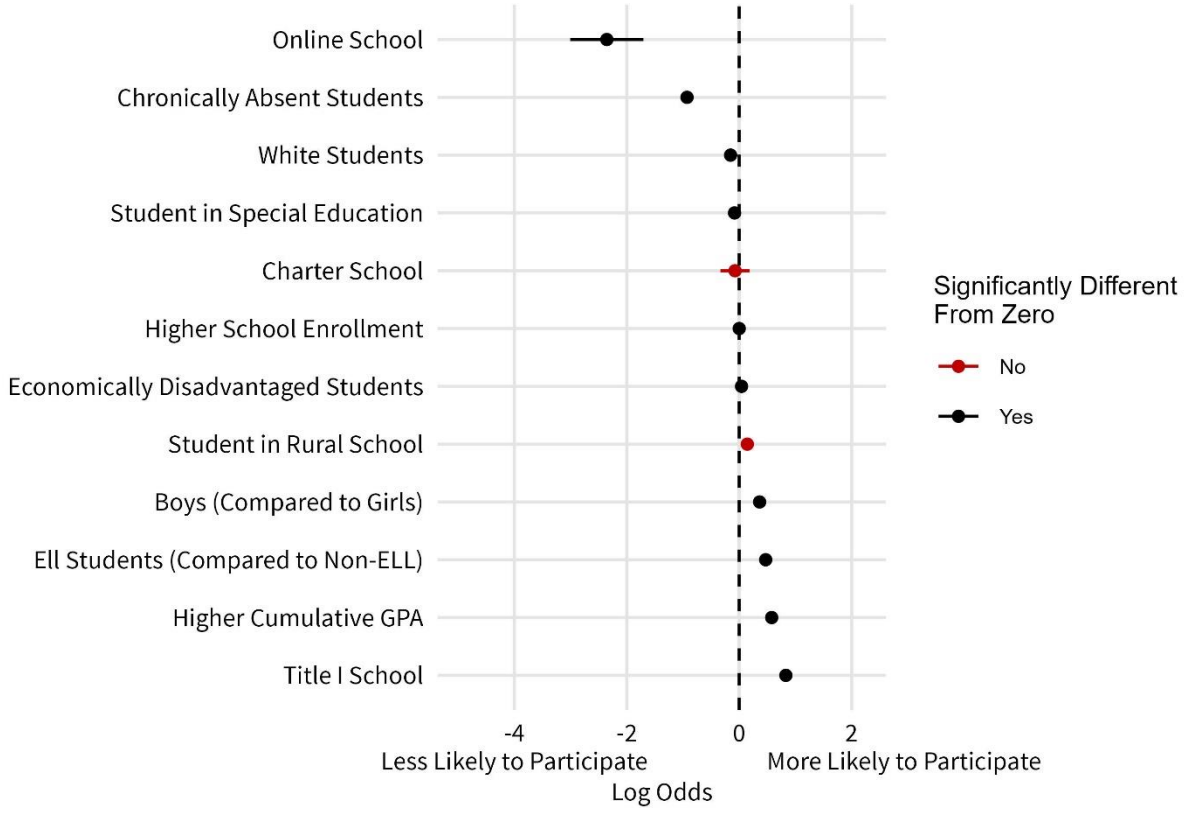


Figure 6 shows the predictor variables (e.g., Online School, Chronically Absent Students) on the vertical axis, and their relationship to participation is indicated by the horizontal axis. The dashed vertical line represents no relationship between a predictor variable and participation. When a point is to the left of the dashed line, the variable is negatively associated with participation. For example, students attending online schools are less likely to participate than students attending brick-and-mortar schools. When a point is to the right of the dashed line, the variable is positively associated

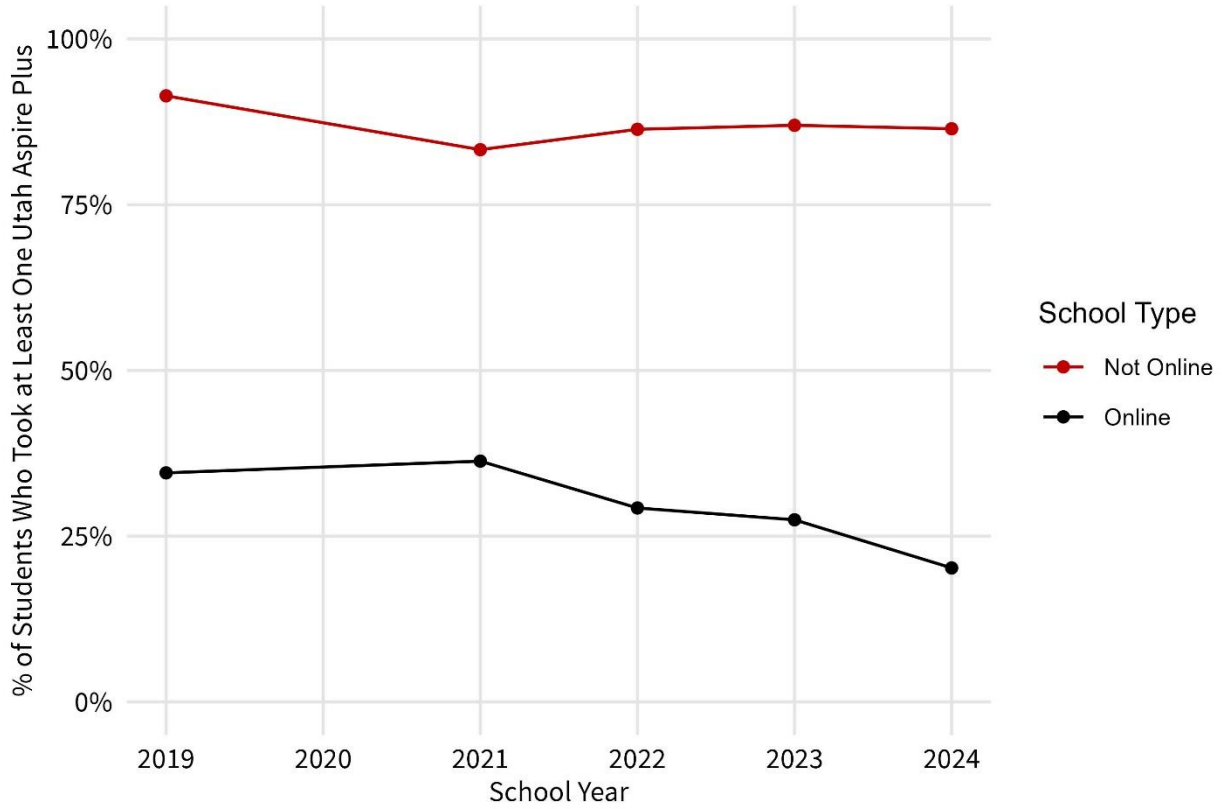
with participation. For example, English Language Learner students are *more* likely to participate than students who are not English Language Learner students. The horizontal whiskers extending to the left and right of each point are 95% confidence intervals and represent the degree of statistical precision in the estimate of the point. Wider whiskers represent more uncertainty in the value of the point. Dots that are black in Figure 6 represent predictor variables that are significantly associated with participation at $p < .01$, indicating that the relationship is stronger than would be expected by chance. Dots that are red in Figure 6 represent predictors whose relationship to participation is non-significant, indicating that their relationship to participation is uncertain and could be the result of chance. The predictor variables in Figure 6 are arranged from top to bottom based on their relationship to participation, with predictors having a negative relationship at the top and those having a positive relationship at the bottom.

Figure 6 shows that the two variables showing the strongest relationship to participation were 1) attending an online school and 2) being chronically absent. These two variables are explored in greater detail in the sections below.

Online Schools

Figure 7 shows the participation rates of students attending online schools (black line) compared to students attending brick-and-mortar schools (red line).

Figure 7. Students in Online Schools are Less Likely to Participate in Utah Aspire Plus



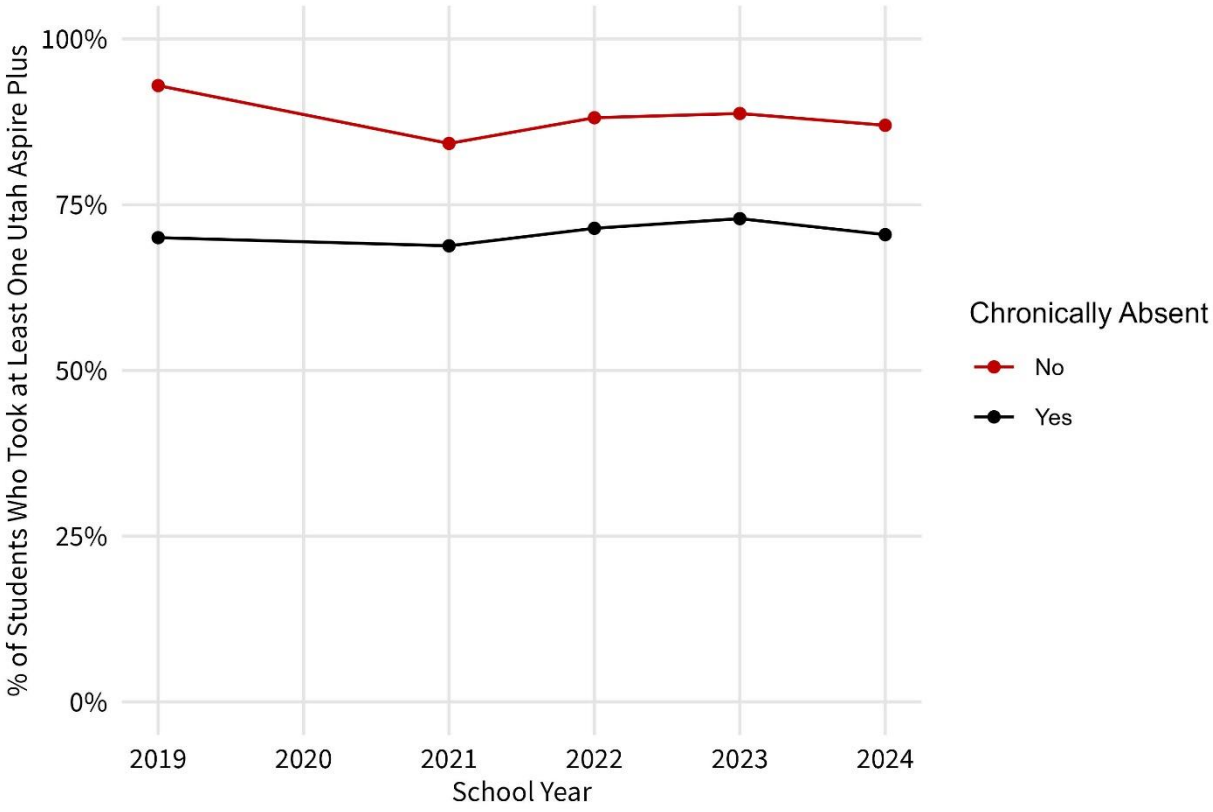
Note: Methods of calculating participation rate differ from the USBE's and should not be considered official (see Appendix A).

Figure 7 reveals why our statistical model indicated that online schools were the largest predictor of participation: **the gap in participation rate between students who do and do not attend online schools is about fifty percentage points**. The percentage of students in online schools who participate in the UA+ has dropped from 35% in 2019 to 20% in 2024. In contrast, the percentage of students who are not in online schools who participate in the Utah Aspire Plus has dropped from 91% in 2019 to 87% in 2024[48]. Although the school record data indicate that attending an online school is an important predictor of not taking the Utah Aspire Plus, that data does not tell us why. The perspectives of students, parents, and administrators in online schools are explored further in Section 4 ("Views on the Utah Aspire Plus"), which includes findings from surveys and interviews.

Chronic Absenteeism

Figure 8 compares the rates of Utah Aspire Plus participation between students who are and are not chronically absent.

Figure 8. Students Who are Chronically Absent are Less Likely to Participate in the Utah Aspire Plus

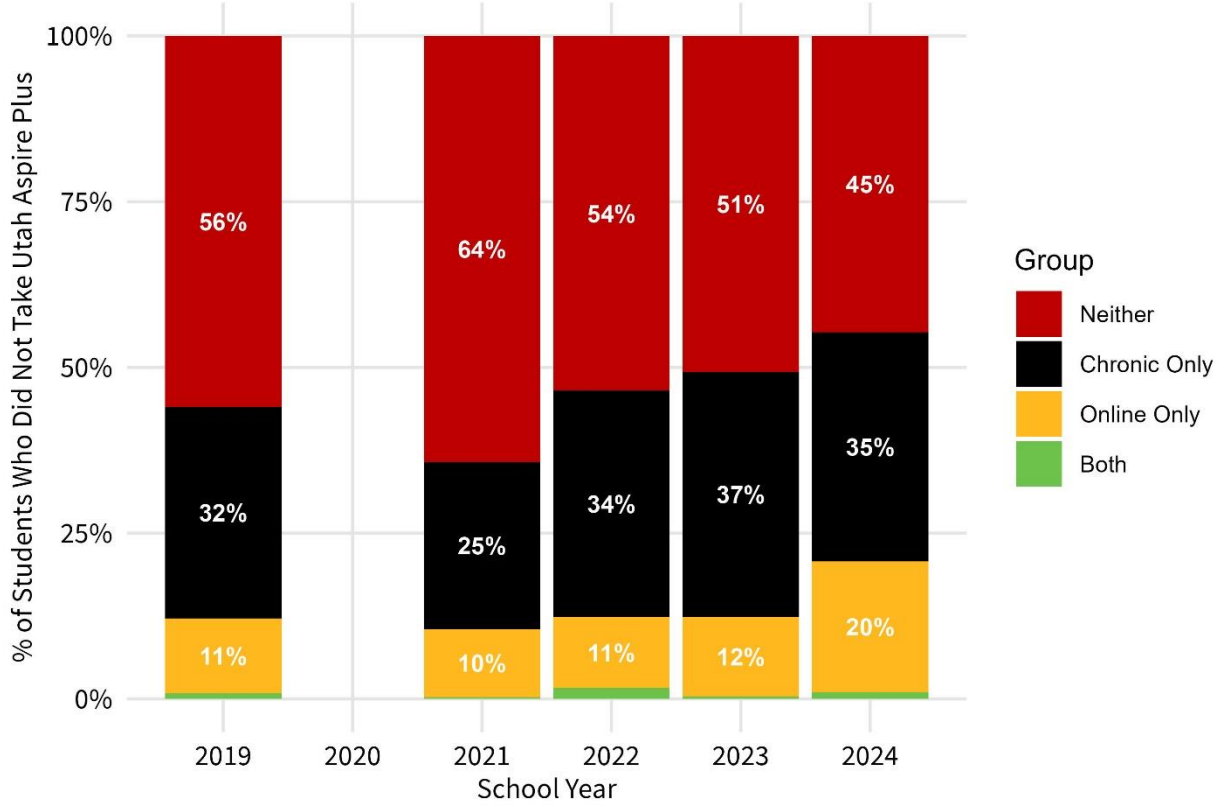


Note: Methods of calculating participation rate differ from the USBE's and should not be considered official (see Appendix A).

[48] Note that these rates are based on eligibility criteria that may differ from those used by USBE and thus may not align with official USBE participation rates. See Appendix A for more details on eligibility.

Comparing Figure 7 and Figure 8 shows that attending an online school has a much bigger effect on the likelihood that an individual student will participate in the UA+ than chronic absenteeism. However, this does not necessarily mean that online schools account for the largest *number* of students who do not take the UA+. Figure 9 shifts from looking at the relationship between predictor variables and the likelihood of individual students participating to the relationship between predictor variables and the percentage of students who did not participate in the UA+.

Figure 9. Students Who are Chronically Absent Account for Slightly More than Students in Online Schools of All Students Who Did Not Participate



Note. No data is shown for 2020 due to the pandemic. See Appendix A for the criteria used to determine student eligibility for the Utah Aspire Plus, which may differ from USBE criteria.

Figure 9 shows, of all students who did not participate in the UA+, what percentage were in an online school, what percentage were chronically absent, what percentage were both in an online school and chronically absent, and what percentage were neither, over time. The students who are chronically absent (shaded black in Figure 9) consistently make up a larger proportion of those who do not participate in the UA+ than the students in online schools (shaded yellow in Figure 9). Thus, even though chronic absenteeism is a weaker predictor of non-participation than attending an online school, it has a larger effect on the total participation rate because of the large number of students who are chronically absent.

Other Demographics Less Likely to Participate

Figure 6 shows that, after chronic absenteeism, other demographic characteristics associated with participation are more modest in magnitude. Those groups less likely than their respective peer groups to participate included girls, students not receiving free/reduced-price lunch, non-English language learners, White students, students who are not in Title I schools, students in schools with fewer students, and students receiving special education services. We also found that the lower a student's cumulative GPA, the less likely the student was to participate. Our model found no evidence that students in charter schools were less or more likely to participate in the UA+, nor did whether the school was in a rural or urban location seem to matter for participation rates.

Summary of Results from Statewide Longitudinal Data

By far, **the biggest takeaway from our results is that students in online schools are much less likely to participate in the UA+ than their in-person counterparts.** This is an interesting finding and will be important to review over time, particularly given the recent policy change permitting online administration for students receiving all their instruction online. As for the rest of our predictors, the results of our analyses largely align with the existing literature. For example, research suggests that students receiving free/reduced-priced lunch are more likely to participate in standardized assessments than students who are not receiving free/reduced-priced lunch[49]. Existing literature also suggests that White students are less likely to participate in standardized assessments, though there can be important geographical differences[50].

Our finding that chronic absenteeism is the strongest student-level factor in predicting non-participation in UA+ is also unsurprising. In addition to the explanation that students who are chronically absent are more likely to have simply missed the day when UA+ was administered, chronic absenteeism is associated with a suite of poorer academic outcomes (e.g., grade point average, course participation) that further research may show is linked to a lower probability of participating in standardized assessments[51].

Together, these results provide powerful evidence for the school-level and student-level factors predicting participation in the UA+. Given that the data used for this analysis included all eligible 9th and 10th-grade students enrolled in public schools in Utah, we can be confident that these results are representative of that population. However, these analyses are limited to surface-level characteristics like demographics. For example, we do not know why students at online schools are so much less likely to participate in the UA+. Thus, we now turn to our survey and interview data to help answer these questions.

[49] Chingos, M. M.(2015). Who opts out of state tests? *Brookings Institute*. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/who-opts-out-of-state-tests/

[50] Ross, L., Chapman, K. P., Dorn, S., & Casanova, C. R. (2023). Opting out of standardized tests at the secondary level—A Geographic Analysis of Colorado. *AERA Open*. doi: 10.1177/23328584231169735.

[51] Gottfried, M. A. (2014). Chronic absenteeism and its effects on students' academic and socioemotional outcomes. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk.* doi: 10.1080/10824669.2014.962696

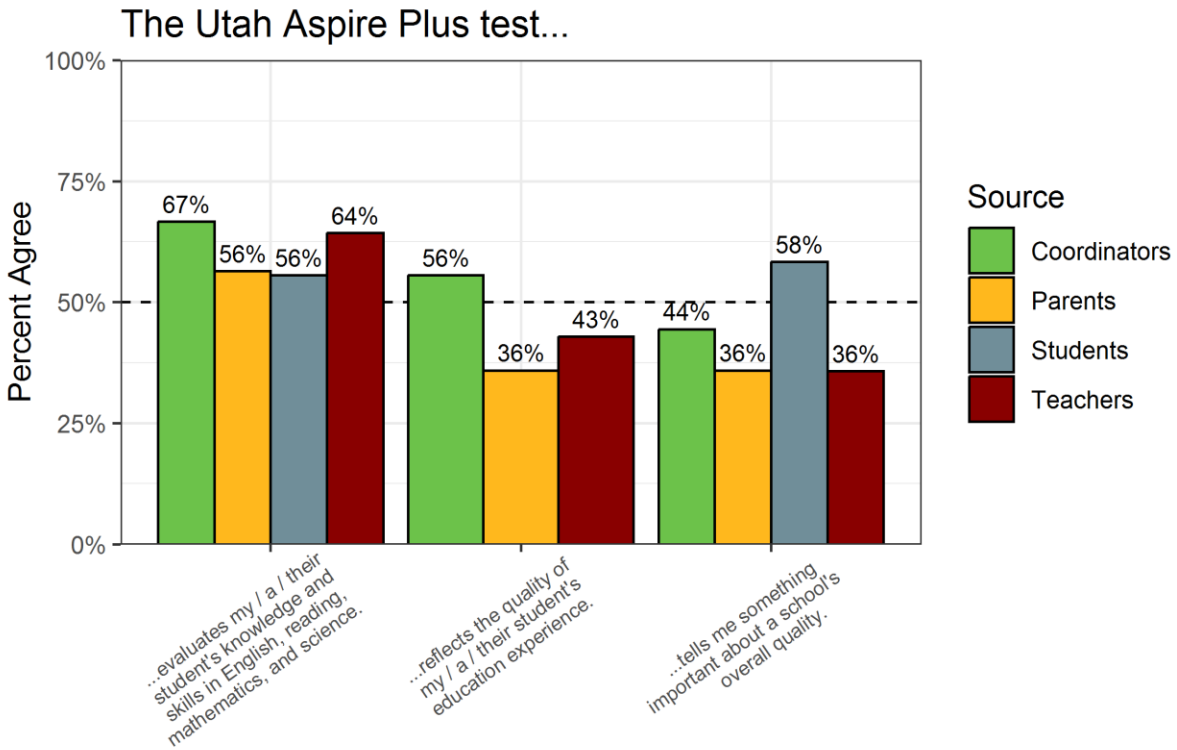
4 | Views on the Utah Aspire Plus

In this section of the report, we present both survey findings (i.e., from students, teachers, assessment coordinators, and parents) and illustrative examples from interviews with parents and school administrators about participants' views on the Utah Aspire Plus (UA+). Although significant efforts were made to maximize the sample size for both surveys and interviews, it is imperative to keep in mind that the sample size is small. Table 2 in Section 2 shows that survey participants included only 75 students, 49 parents, 14 teachers, and nine assessment coordinators, and interview participants included only five school administrators and three parents. The concerns expressed by these 155 individuals are a sample of specific concerns that exist in the population, but they should not be interpreted as faithfully representing that population. We have organized this section around themes that address the primary research questions. Specifically, we address the perceived validity, utility, impact, risk, and obstacles to UA+ participation with illustrative data from the surveys and interviews. Note that for our surveys, not all questions were asked of every group, as some questions did not apply to that group.

Validity of the UA+

The perceived validity of the UA+ refers to the degree to which the UA+ is seen as measuring what it claims to measure. Responses to three items addressing validity are presented in Figure 10 by participant group and are followed by a discussion of these findings.

Figure 10. Perceptions of the Validity of the Utah Aspire Plus



Note: Coordinators *n* = 9, Parents *n* = 49, Students *n* = 75, Teachers *n* = 14. "Coordinators" refer to school staff or administrators responsible for coordinating the UA+ at their school. Coordinators were asked to report their perceptions of *parents'* opinions on the Utah Aspire Plus. Only applicable questions were asked of each group, meaning that not all groups answered all questions listed here.

Knowledge and skills. The first set of bars on the left side of Figure 10 may be the most direct reflection of perceptions of the validity of the UA+ because this item asks whether the test captures the central focus of the UA+: student knowledge and skill in the four subject areas of English, reading, mathematics, and science. More than half of survey respondents in all groups (56-67%) acknowledged that the UA+ accomplished this goal. This level of support is by no means robust, but it is higher than might be expected given the skepticism expressed in other items and in interviews. The finding that more than half of respondents agree that the test evaluates knowledge of these subject areas suggests that dissatisfaction with the assessment may be less concerned with its ability to deliver on the promise of measuring these subject areas and more on what the test neglects or on how the test results are used.

On open-ended survey responses, a few parents suggested that performance on the UA+ reflected general test-taking ability more than specific knowledge and skills (e.g., "students … may be able to pass a test, but do not understand the actual topic"). Two parents expressed concern that standardized assessments shift teachers' goals from increasing student understanding to more superficial test-taking ability. Another parent indicated that the knowledge and skills of students with low test-taking ability were not well measured by the Utah Aspire Plus.

Quality of education experience and overall school quality. The second and third survey items were more general and comprehensive, asking about the extent to which the test reflects the quality of a student's "education experience" or the overall quality of a school. The lower ratings for these items than the previous one may reflect the contrast between the assessment's ability to capture knowledge and skills in specific subject areas and its ability to capture other important aspects of a student's education experience, including their experiences in other subject areas (e.g., art, music) and other important experiences related to school (e.g., extracurricular activities, interactions and relationships with teachers). This more comprehensive perspective of educational experience is reflected in the USBE's "Portrait of a Graduate," which lists Academic Mastery as only one of thirteen domains alongside Collaboration and Teamwork, Hard Work & Resilience, and Respect.[52] Although the UA+ addresses academic mastery, it was not designed to address these other areas and so may be seen as an incomplete reflection of educational experience or school quality.

Concerns about Alignment between UA+ and Existing Curriculum

Several respondents expressed concerns about a lack of alignment between the UA+ and Utah state standards, course grades, or material covered in class. For example, one assessment coordinator reported, "I have talked to many parents that are concerned that Aspire Plus is not aligned to the Utah Core Curriculum…The data that they receive for their student does not reflect how they did on the curriculum that is being taught each day at school." If the UA+ is not aligned with state standards, then the assessment's validity is compromised because the standards represent the constructs that the assessment is designed to capture: the knowledge and skills that a student is expected to acquire

[52] https://schools.utah.gov/portraitgraduate

by a particular grade level. **The subject area most commonly mentioned in the context of misalignment was science**:

- "The science test is really hard for students because they are testing earth science students on biology or physics or chemistry, and vice versa" (Educator)
- "When I was taking the science test it had many questions about physics and chemistry even though I took Biology." (Student)
- "The ACT and core curriculum are vastly different, especially in science." (Assessment coordinator)

The Utah state standards for science education are uniform within grade for grades K-8, but experiences with science in grades 9-12 can be quite different across students.[53] To graduate from high school, students are required to earn three credits in science, two of which must be from the fields of earth science, biology, chemistry, physics, or computer science.[54] The choice and sequence of these courses can be different for different students. The UA+ contains an average of 21% of possible points from life science, 21% from physical science, and 38% from earth and space science.[55] All UA+ test-takers answer questions in all these science areas regardless of what classes they have taken. In addition, the assessment reports that show results for individual students show only a single "science" score.[56] As a result, a student who does well in one science area but poorly on the others cannot see their relative performance across areas but just an average. In Section 6 ("Considerations"), we return to the issue of perceived misalignment with the science portion of the UA+ and provide some recommendations for reducing this perception.

The perceived lack of alignment between the UA+ and state standards was described by some administrators as a **contributing factor to a lack of teacher buy-in** to the UA+. Two administrators explicitly contrasted the lack of alignment on the UA+ with stronger alignment on the RISE test. For example, one school administrator explained, "Whether you like the RISE test or you don't like the RISE test, at the end of the day it at least is very focused on testing the Utah state standards… Teachers don't look at [the Utah Aspire Plus] and think, 'Oh, well, that's going to help me figure out how to teach the Utah state standards better,' because while it obviously incorporates some of those standards, it's not the focus of it." Another administrator said, "I mean, as far as finding something that we can buy into as a school that gives us value that I can get teachers on board with, it'd be nice to have a tool that was more tied, kind of like the RISE is, that's more tied to the state curriculum."

Motivation to Do Well

Several respondents indicated that they believed students were not motivated to try hard on the assessment, instead "randomly clicking" through it because "they know it does not matter" or because the "tests are not high stakes for students." One student said, "no one tries on them" and asked, "why waste my time doing something that doesn't go on my grade?" Scholars of standardized assessment have long recognized that students' motivation to do well is important for obtaining an

[53] https://schools.utah.gov/curr/science/_science_/UtahSEEdStandards.pdf
[54] https://schools.utah.gov/curr/graduationrequirements
[55] https://utah.mypearsonsupport.com/assets/pdf/2021-22%20Utah%20Aspire%20Plus%20Science%20Test%20Blueprint_WEBTAG.pdf
[56] http://utah.pearsonaccessnext.com/resources/additional-services/UTPlusParentScore22_WebTag.pdf

accurate measure of students' knowledge and skills.[57] Although some of our respondents were skeptical that students were motivated to do well, 86% of the students who responded to our survey either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "When I take a standardized test, I try to do my best." These students were not a representative sample of UA+ test-takers, so this proportion (86%) is unlikely to be an accurate reflection of the population's response to that question. However, this finding is evidence against the claim that the UA+ is invalid because of the absence of student motivation.

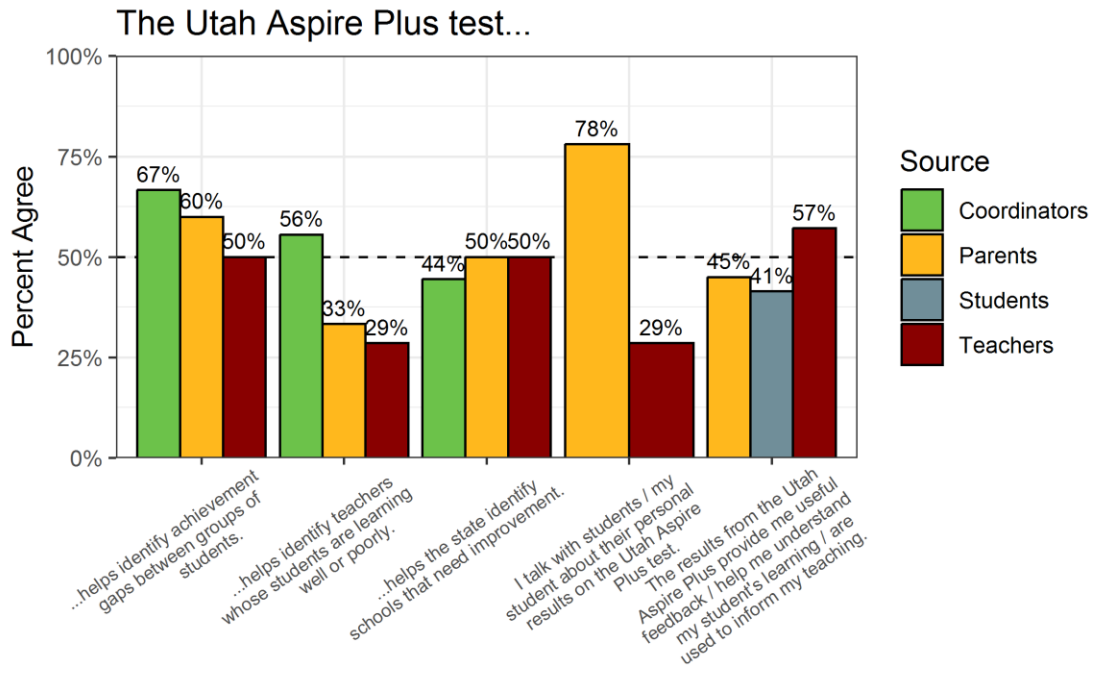
Utility of the Results from the UA+

A central goal of this study is to improve understanding of the "perceived and realized value" of the UA+ to students, parents, and educators. As mentioned in Section 1, the results from the UA+ are intended to be used to provide feedback to individual students, teachers, and schools about student performance relative to expectations. Teachers might use the results to modify their teaching plans for the coming year and administrators might use the results to allocate resources to improve the success of all students. Using surveys and interviews, the UEPC sought to gather information about how well the UA+ goal of providing useful feedback was being achieved.

Figure 11 summarizes responses to survey items related to the perceived utility of the UA+. The five survey items asked whether the UA+ identifies schools that need improvement, achievement gaps between groups of students, and teachers whose students are doing well or poorly. The items also asked whether results were being discussed with students and whether the results provide feedback that is useful.

[57] Eklöf, H. (2010). Skill and will: Test-taking motivation and assessment quality. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice, 17*(4), 345–356. https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594X.2010.516569

Figure 11. Participant responses to items related to the perceived usefulness of the Utah Aspire Plus



Note: Coordinators *n* = 9, Parents *n* = 49, Students *n* = 75, Teachers *n* = 14. "Coordinators" refers to school staff or administrators with responsibility for coordinating the Utah Aspire Plus at the school, who were asked to report their perceptions of *parents'* opinions on the Utah Aspire Plus. Only applicable questions were asked of each group, meaning that not all groups answered all questions listed here.

As indicated in Figure 11, there were three areas where approximately half of assessment coordinators, parents, and teachers saw the UA+ as useful: 1) identifying schools that need improvement, 2) identifying achievement gaps between groups of students, and 3) providing feedback that was useful either to understand oneself (students), one's child (parents), or to improve one's teaching (teachers). In contrast, only about one-third of parents and teachers agreed that the UA+ could identify teachers whose students were learning well or poorly. The greater support for using the UA+ to identify achievement gaps and struggling schools than for evaluating teachers is consistent with the backlash against the use of student assessment in teacher evaluations that was discussed in Section 1. However, a 2020 national survey showed equally high support among parents for using test results to compare schools (68%) and to evaluate teachers (68%).[58]

The responses of parents and teachers were sharply divided on the question of discussing the Utah Aspire Plus with students, with parents much more likely to say they discussed results with students (78%) than teachers (29%). Just over half (57%) of teachers reported that they used the UA+ results to inform their instruction. In open-ended comments on the survey, teachers explained how the end-of-year timing of the release of student test results made it difficult to engage with current students: "By

[58] "Public school priorities in a political year" (September 2020). *PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools.*

the time we get the results of Aspire Plus Test, we often no longer have those students." This problem with receiving results too late for them to be useful may be resolving due to recent improvements to the UA+. According to the 2022-23 UA+ technical report, the spring 2023 administration marked the first time that scores could be delivered immediately following testing.[59] Even with potential challenges in the timing of receiving results, some teachers described using test results to plan for the following year or to make recommendations for student class placements.

Of the parents who responded to the survey, only 41% indicated that the UA+ results were useful for them to understand their child's learning. Two parents said that they found the information from their child's teacher to be more useful than assessment results.

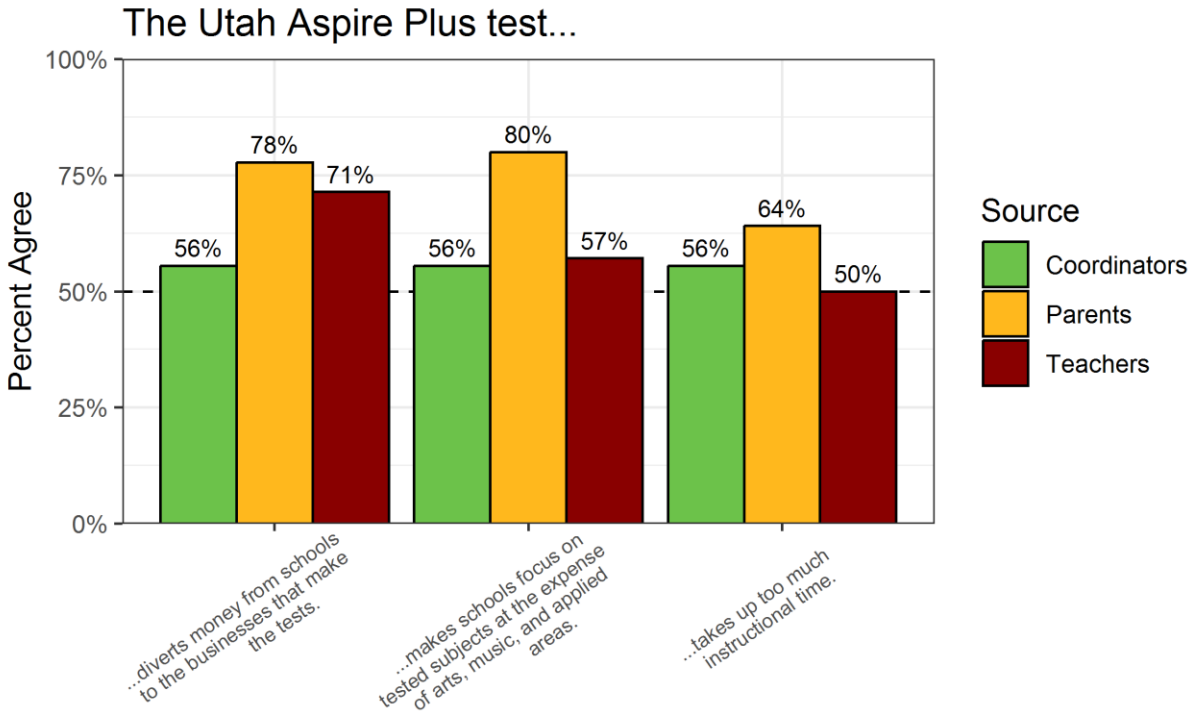
Finally, the UA+ is sometimes marketed to students and parents as practice for the ACT college admissions test. However, this perspective on value was challenged by students and parents of students who were not planning to attend college.

Impact of the UA+ on Schools and Instruction

As discussed in Section 1, there are several persistent criticisms of standardized assessment in the U.S. Three of these are focused on the impact of standardized assessment on schools and on the quality of instruction. Specifically, the concerns are that standardized assessments: 1) narrow the curriculum by encouraging schools to focus only on subjects covered by the assessment; 2) require the sacrifice of valuable instructional time; and 3) divert funding for public education away from instruction and other valued activities and toward private companies that make and administer the assessments. This study sought to understand the perspectives of Utah assessment coordinators, parents, and teachers about these areas. The percentage of respondents who indicated either agreement or strong agreement with these ideas is presented in Figure 12.

[59] https://schools.utah.gov/assessment/_assessment_/_resources_/_technical_reports_/22_UAPlusTechnicalReport.pdf, page 11.

Figure 12. Perceptions of impacts on schools and instruction



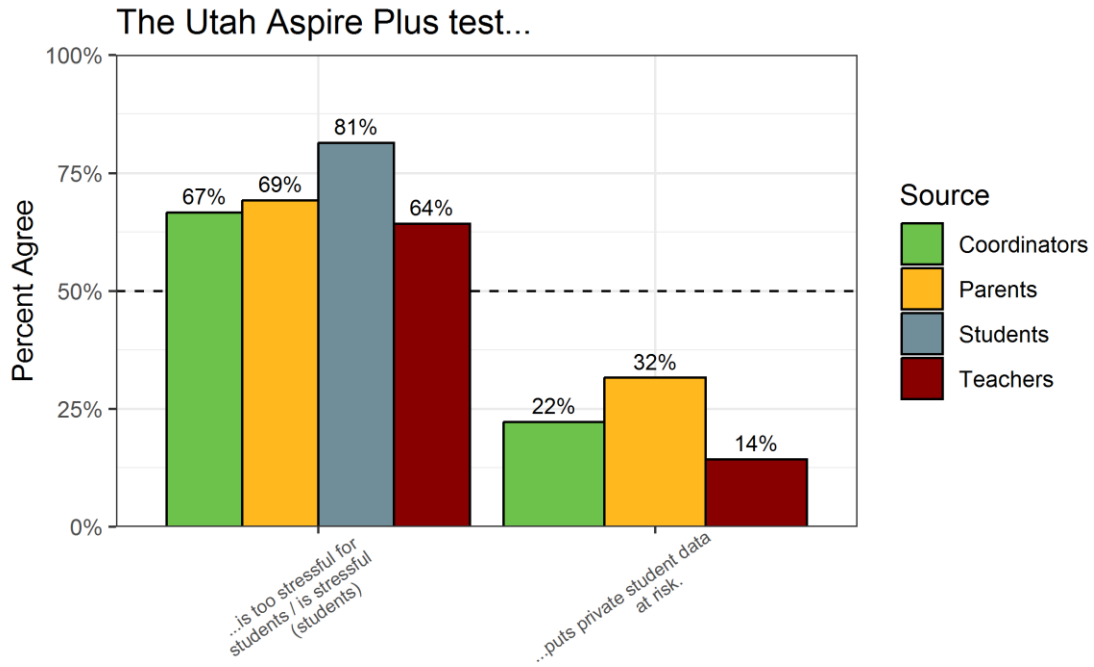
Note: Coordinators *n* = 9, Parents *n* = 49, Teachers *n* = 14. "Coordinators" refers to school staff or administrators responsible for coordinating the UA+ at the school, who were asked to report their perceptions of *parents'* opinions on the Utah Aspire Plus.

In all three of the groups who were asked about these concerns (assessment coordinators, who answered based on their views of parents' opinions, parents themselves, and teachers), more than half agreed that the UA+ diverts money from schools, limits schools' focus to tested subjects, and takes too much instructional time. Agreement was highest among parents, who were especially critical of the narrowing of the curriculum (80% agreement) and the redirection of education funding for testing (78%).

Risks to Students: Stress and Data Privacy

Two items on the surveys addressed risks for students: the perceived stress associated with standardized testing and the perceived risk to students' data from participating. The percentage of respondents who agreed to these items is reported in Figure 13.

Figure 13. Perceptions of risks to students



Note: In the figure above, the item concerning stress was phrased differently for students than for other groups. For students, the item asked students how much they agreed that "Taking standardized tests *is stressful*" whereas for other groups, they were asked how much they agreed that "The Utah Aspire Plus test is *too* stressful for students." Coordinators *n* = 9, Parents *n* = 49, Students *n* = 75, Teachers *n* = 14. "Coordinators" refers to school staff or administrators responsible for coordinating the Utah Aspire Plus at the school, who were asked to report their perceptions of *parents'* opinions on the Utah Aspire Plus. Only applicable questions were asked of each group, meaning that not all groups answered all questions listed here.

Stress

Approximately two-thirds of coordinator (representing their perceptions of parents' opinions), parent, and teacher participants responded that the UA+ was "too stressful for students," and 81% of students agreed that the assessment "is stressful." Research on test anxiety suggests that between 15% and 22% of students experience levels that could be considered "high"[60] and a recent meta-analysis confirms that test anxiety is especially pronounced when the test is difficult or seen as important or consequential[61], which could be the case for end-of-year assessments that report a student's performance relative to their peers.

[60] Putwain, D., & Daly, A. (2014). Test anxiety prevalence and gender differences in a sample of English secondary school students. *Educational Studies, 40* (5), 554-570. DOI: 10.1080/03055698.2014.953914.
Thomas, C. L., Cassady, J. C., & Finch, W. H. (2018). Identifying severity standards on the cognitive test anxiety scale: Cut score determination using latent class and cluster analysis. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment, 36*(5), 492-508.

[61] Von der Embse, N., Jester, D., Roy, D., & Post, J. (2018). Test anxiety effects, predictors, and correlates: A 30-year meta-analytic review. *Journal of Affective Disorders, 227*, 483-493.

Interviews and open-ended responses reinforce the view that many students experience stress from the assessment. One parent indicated that their child, whom they identified as having learning delays, was conscious of his poor performance during the test and experienced stress partly from comparing himself to other students who were performing better. Another parent told the story of their child struggling after more than two hours of testing: "She was in tears, she was done. And I think it's putting these kids through so much that it's not worth it."

> "[Parents] may view the test as an additional stressor for their child rather than a useful measure of progress."
>
> (Assessment Coordinator, Survey)

Data Privacy

Compared to most of the other issues explored in the survey, concerns about data privacy were lower. As illustrated in Figure 13, only 32% of surveyed parents agreed that the Utah Aspire Plus puts student data at risk. Although less widely held than other concerns, the concern over data privacy was nevertheless very important to some parents. One parent interviewee explained that student data privacy was the primary reason he opted his children out of standardized tests: "the school district cannot provide me assurances that my kids' information is not being sold off to the likes of Google, and Microsoft, and Apple for free in exchange for free software, and free hardware, and whatever other gimmicks they're offering in exchange for the information."

Practical Barriers to Participation

In addition to the themes associated with the survey items presented in the figures in this section, another theme that emerged from interviews and open-ended survey responses was practical barriers to participation.

Length of Test. Several study participants indicated that an assessment spanning several hours made them reluctant to participate, and they suggested splitting the assessment across several days.

Attendance Policy. Another barrier to participation may be the attendance policy for students who choose not to participate. If the policy is that non-participants are not required to attend school on test day, non-participation may increase because this is an attractive alternative. Two of the nine assessment coordinators we surveyed indicated that students who chose not to participate in the assessment were excused from school that day. It is worth noting that these two schools had exceptionally low participation rates: 57% and 63%. An administrator who scheduled the UA+ for a Friday and combined it with distance learning for students who did not participate regretted that decision, feeling that non-participation increased because the alternative of a "long weekend" was too attractive.

Online Schools. Administrators described several barriers to UA+ participation that are distinctive to online schools. None of the administrators of online schools with whom we spoke were aware of the remote online administration option that was introduced in spring 2024, and thus many of the barriers they discuss are related to online students participating in in-person testing. The first barrier they mentioned was transportation: many families had to travel significant distances to a school or testing center, in some cases up to an hour and a half. Second, students in online schools are accustomed to online interactions with their teachers and peers and may feel uncomfortable traveling to an unfamiliar location and taking the test with students they do not know. This was also mentioned in the USBE records of annual test observers for UA+, discussed in Appendix F. Asked "what areas were challenging with this test administration," one observer wrote "Online school--students test in unfamiliar locations where they don't receive instruction." Lastly, administrators explained that some parents opted their children out of the assessment because it was required to be taken in person and they had chosen an online form of education for their student. Administrators from online schools suggested that the ability to administer and proctor the assessment remotely would increase their students' participation rates in the assessment.

> "One of the reasons they chose a virtual school is they don't want to have to come into a building."
>
> (Administrator, interview)

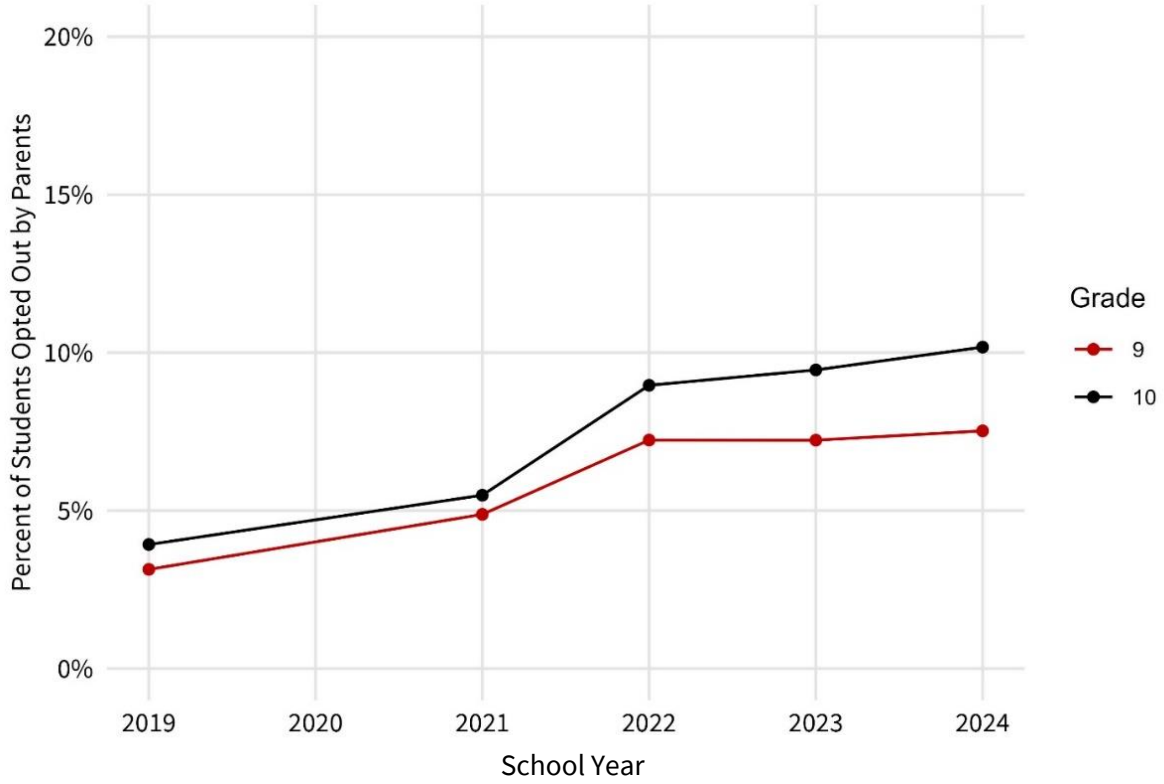
5 | Opting Out of the Utah Aspire Plus

As discussed in Section 1, state statute enables parents in Utah to exclude their child from participating in standardized assessments such as the Utah Aspire Plus (UA+). How does opting out contribute to the decline in participation rates? This question is the focus of this section, which combines data from the statewide longitudinal database with data from surveys and interviews.

Opt-Out Rates over Time

Information about students being opted out comes from "participation codes" submitted along with students' scores on standardized assessments by LEAs to the USBE. These codes record the reasons why a student may not have participated in the assessment, including that they were opted out by a parent. Figure 14 shows the percentage of eligible students in 9th and 10th grade who had opt-out codes between 2019 and 2024.

Figure 14. Utah Aspire Plus Parental Opt-Out Rate



Note: Opt-out rates represent the percentage of students eligible to take the Utah Aspire Plus who were assigned an assessment participation code indicating parental opt-out. See Appendix A for the criteria used to determine student eligibility for the Utah Aspire Plus, which may differ from USBE criteria.

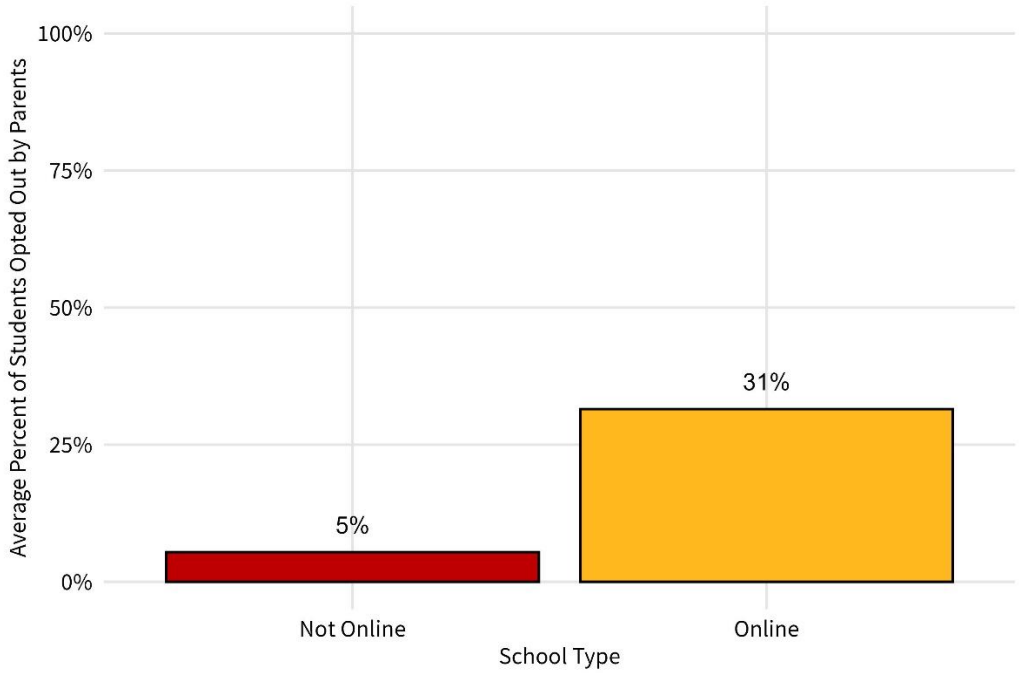
As Figure 14 indicates, rates of opting out doubled from 2019 to 2024, increasing from 3% to 7% for 9th graders and from 4% to over 10% for 10th graders. The opt-out rate only has a direct impact on the participation rate when it indicates students who would otherwise have participated. For example, parents who were previously supportive of standardized assessment might change their mind and prefer that their students not participate. For parents who make such a change, every one percent

increase in the opt-out rate represents a one percent decrease in the participation rate. In the rare case that a student has a valid test score and has been opted out, the Utah Accountability Testing Manual[62] indicates that those students' scores are not used and thus they are not counted as participants. However, to the degree that the opt-out rate reflects students who would not have participated anyway, the opt-out rate will be unrelated to participation rates. If a student changes from being a non-participant to being opted out, the participation rate is unaffected. To better understand the relationship between the rising opt-out rate and the participation rate, more research is needed to explore the degree to which opted-out students represent those who would otherwise have participated or those who would otherwise not have participated.

Online Schools Have Much Higher Opt-Out Rates

To answer which student-level and school-level factors are associated with the percentage of students who are opted-out of the UA+, we constructed a model similar to our 9th and 10th grade model, except the outcome was whether a student was opted-out of at least one of the UA+ subject tests that year. This model found that, when controlling for other factors, the strongest single predictor was if the school was online. Figure 15 shows that without controlling for any other variables, the raw opt-out rate for online schools was 31%, compared to only 6% for schools that were not online.

Figure 15. Online Schools Have a Higher Percentage of Students Who Are Opted Out of the Utah Aspire Plus by Parents



Note: The opt-out rate is calculated by dividing the number of students with opt-out participation codes by the total number of students eligible for the assessment. The UEPC's calculations of eligibility may differ from the USBE's (see Appendix A).

[62] Utah State Board of Education. (August 2024). *Utah Accountability Technical Manual, 2024-2025.* Page 11

Other Groups More Likely to Opt-out

Other groups that were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to opt-out included: students who were chronically absent, students in charter schools, White students, girls (compared to boys), students not in a Title I school, non-English language learners, students receiving special education services, students with a lower cumulative GPA, students who are not eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch, and students in larger schools. We did not find evidence of a relationship between a student's likelihood of being opted out and the population density of a school's location (e.g., rural or urban).

Administrators' Concerns about the Easy Opt-out Process

In interviews and open-ended survey responses, some administrators indicated that an important contributing factor to declining participation in the UA+ was the opt-out process itself, especially the state law requiring it to be easy to opt out. Two administrators used the phrase "cutting us off at the knees" to describe the effect of the opt-out process on efforts to raise participation rates. In response to a survey question asking about policies that affect participation in the UA+, one assessment coordinator reported that "the only policy that adversely affects participation is the state policy allowing parents to opt out." Another administrator recalled that, prior to the 2015 statute easing the opt-out process, he would meet with parents and try to persuade them to permit their child to participate: "When your student doesn't take the test, … we don't have that information to know how we're doing." School administrators felt pressure to assess student learning but also felt that state law was undermining those efforts. When asked what the state might do to support participation in the assessment, one administrator replied, "don't allow parents the choice to opt out."

Online Homeschooled Students

One of the schools in our sample was a large online school that is nominally affiliated with a school district (to coordinate high school diplomas for the small number of students who request them), but it is operated by a private online learning company that serves students throughout Utah as well as other states. This school had approximately 1,000 students in Utah that, according to our criteria, were eligible for the UA+. In 2023-24, its UA+ participation rate was only 7% and its opt-out rate was 82%. In conversations with the district assessment coordinator, we learned that most of the students enrolled in this school would ordinarily be classified as home-schooled, but because of their district affiliation, they were considered eligible to participate in the UA+ if they took any of the courses linked to UA+ subject areas. In 2024, this school alone accounted for 7.6% of all students who did not participate in UA+. If state policy permits, some of the students at this school might more accurately be identified as home-school students and thus be removed from the roster of public school students who are expected to participate in standardized statewide assessments.

6 | Considerations

This report describes the results of a study to investigate the decline in the rate of student participation in the Utah Aspire Plus (UA+). In the sections above, we reviewed evidence from scholarship on attitudes toward standardized assessment, student-level participation data, and surveys and interviews of stakeholders. In this section, we summarize the main findings from this study and provide considerations for improving participation in the UA+. Note that our focus is on participation in the UA+ and on perceptions that may influence that participation. Although some of those perceptions are related to the UA+'s validity or alignment to state standards, direct evidence of these is discussed in the UA+ technical reports.[63]

Opting Out

According to our analysis, the rate of students being opted out of the UA+ by their parents has doubled between 2019 and 2024 and in 2024 was approximately 7% for 9th graders and 10% for 10th graders.[64] When we asked school administrators and assessment coordinators about policies that influenced the participation rate on the UA+, both groups pointed to the 2015 changes to state law that made it easier for parents to opt their children out of standardized assessments.

Why are parents opting their children out of assessment? Although our sample of students, parents, teachers, assessment coordinators, and school administrators is small and unrepresentative, many of the answers to this question echoed reasons we uncovered in our review of the literature on attitudes toward standardized assessments. These reasons included doubts about the validity of the assessment (i.e., skepticism that it adequately captures student knowledge and skill); doubts about how useful the assessment is; and concerns about assessment having negative side effects such as student stress or a narrowing of the curriculum.

Considerations for addressing these reasons for opting out include:

1. **Advocate for assessment**. The public conversation about assessment is often dominated by only one side of the argument: opting out. If parents do not encounter another side, they may conclude that there isn't another side or that it is only weakly supported.
2. **Emphasize the benefits of participation in UA+ for the *community* rather than for individual students**. Parents often think of assessment through the lens of their individual child's experience. This perspective neglects a major role of standardized assessment: to identify when a program or a school is succeeding or struggling to serve students. Participation in the UA+ serves the interests of the community by providing information that benefits *all* students.
3. Gather and share evidence that directly **addresses parents' concerns**. Share research showing that student scores carry meaningful information and are not just noise caused by random guessing. Share stories about how individual students were helped by their results and how programs have been improved.

Online Schools

[63] https://schools.utah.gov/assessment/_assessment_/_resources_/_technical_reports_/22_UAPlusTechnicalReport.pdf

[64] Note that due to differences between our criteria for eligibility and the USBE's method, these rates may differ from official USBE rates of opt-out. See Appendix A for details on eligibility.

Our analysis of statewide student data indicated that only 20% of students attending online schools participated in UA+, compared to 87% of students in brick-and-mortar schools. Much of this difference was due to the fact that the opt-out rate for students at online schools was 31%, compared to 6% at brick-and-mortar schools. Thus, the two factors of online schools and opting out are intertwined, and our recommendations for reducing opt-out (advocate for assessment, emphasize the benefit to the community, and address parents' concerns) apply to online schools as well.

Our survey and interview data suggest that some of the higher opt-out rate at online schools was driven by the obstacles introduced through requiring in-person testing of students attending online schools, including transportation challenges and students being uncomfortable taking the UA+ in an unfamiliar environment. None of the participating administrators expressed awareness that online administration began as an option in Spring 2024. Therefore, one consideration for improving UA+ participation among students attending online schools is to spread the word about the remote online option.

Chronic Absenteeism

Chronically absent students were approximately eight percentage points less likely to participate than students who were not chronically absent. This predictor may be unsurprising because chronically absent students would be expected to be more absent during assessment. However, chronic absenteeism plays a surprisingly powerful role in participation rates because of the large number of chronically absent students. Our analysis indicates that 35% of the students who did not participate in the Utah Aspire Plus in 2024 were chronically absent.

Chronic absenteeism is a nationwide problem affecting not just Utah but schools across the country, especially since the closure of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic[65]. The USBE is aware of the chronic absenteeism problem and has invested in efforts to better understand and mitigate it[66]. Our only recommendation is to continue these efforts because reducing the rate of chronic absenteeism may lead to improved participation rates on UA+.

Perceived Misalignment

In Section 4, we reviewed evidence that some students perceived a misalignment between the UA+ and their experiences in the classroom, especially with science. The concern was that students felt they were being tested on topics that they had not yet covered. One explanation for this perceived misalignment is the design of the UA+ science section, which asks students questions about earth and space science, life science, and physical science regardless of what classes a student has taken, and provides only a single score summarizing a student's performance across all of these science areas. Although this design does permit a view of student proficiency in science by aggregating across many students, it may lead to frustration at the individual student level and does not provide science-area-level feedback to science teachers. One solution to these challenges would be an assessment that tailors its science content to the science course most recently completed by a student (e.g., just biology, earth science, etc.). One benefit of this approach would be that this section could be longer

[65] Dee, T. S. (2024). Higher chronic absenteeism threatens academic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 121*(3). https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2312249121
[66] Attendance strategies: A ULEAD Education Innovative Practice Report. (July 2023). https://schools.utah.gov/ulead/uleadfiles/reports/ipr/Attendance%20IPR.pdf

and thus its scope and reliability would be greater than the current UA+ design, which includes items from several science areas. Another benefit is that the results of the assessment would have greater meaning for science educators, who could receive area-specific feedback (e.g., just physics) rather than feedback aggregating across multiple science areas.

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Appendix A: Eligibility for the Utah Aspire Plus

Here, we review the rules we used to determine eligibility for the Utah Aspire Plus. To determine eligibility for the Utah Aspire Plus, we started with the Utah Accountability Technical Manual (UATM) and, when that guidance was incomplete, supplemented with the EDFacts data reporting standards for the US Department of Education[67]. Our research uncovered a third reporting standard using yet another set of criteria for eligibility -- the Utah report card[68] -- but we did not use these eligibility criteria because they resulted in estimated rates of participation far above the rates published by the USBE (typically at or above 96%). For this study, we considered a student to be **eligible** when:

1. The student is enrolled in 9th or 10th grade in a public school in Utah.
2. The student is not a foreign exchange student.
3. The student was not eligible for the alternative assessment due to significant cognitive disability. Students with this designation are eligible to complete the Dynamic Learning Maps (DLM)[69] assessment rather than the Utah Aspire Plus.
4. The student does not have a Utah Aspire Plus participation code classified as "not countable" in Appendix A of the 2024-25 Utah Accountability Technical Manual.[70] Specifically, codes 103, 107, 111, 112, 202, 208.
5. The student either had a score for the Utah Aspire Plus or a, b, and c are all true:
    a. The student was enrolled at the school for at least one day during the Utah Aspire Plus testing window (typically the first Monday in March until the end of the school year).
    b. The student was a full-time student *and* took at least one course on a list of approved courses that qualified them for at least one of the three Utah Aspire Plus subject tests (i.e., Language, Math, and Science). Note: if the student was full-time and was taking a course that made them eligible for one of the subject tests, they were eligible for the other two subject tests as well.
    c. The student was a part-time student *and* took one course (on a list of approved courses) that qualified them for the corresponding subject test (i.e., Language, Math, and Science). Note, in contrast to full-time students, part-time students would only be eligible to participate in the subject test corresponding to the course they are taking.

We used the following rules to determine whether a student **participated**:

1. The student was eligible (as defined above).
2. The student had a Utah Aspire Plus score.

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[67] The UEPC extends its gratitude to Malia McIlvenna for her patient explanation of the SQL code used to determine eligibility for EDFacts.

[68] Available online at https://reportcard.schools.utah.gov/State/ParticipationRate/?StateID=99&SchoolLevel=HS&schoolyearendyear=2023. Note that, according to this standard, the participation rate for the Utah Aspire Plus was 97% in 2022-23 and 96-97% in 2023-24.

[69] Utah State Board of Education (September 2023). Utah Accountability Technical Manual, 2023-2024. https://reportcard.schools.utah.gov/Documents/AccountabilityTechnicalManual2024.pdf

[70] Utah State Board of Education (August 2024). Utah Accountability Technical Manual, 2024-2025. https://schools.utah.gov/assessment/_assessment_/_resources_/_accountability_/2024AccountabilityTechnicalManual.pdf

3. Testing data was available for the student at the same school during the same year as they were enrolled.
4. The student did not have a participation code indicating that their parent opted them out of testing. Specifically, codes 204 and 214. Note that this effectively changes a "yes, participated" to a "No, did not participate," even if a score is available for the student.

Utah Accountability Technical Manual

Our translation of the Utah Accountability Technical Manual into our eligibility criteria is explained below.

On page 9, section "A" of the UATM for 2023-24 on page 10, section "A" of the UATM for 2024-25, it reads:

> **Assigned Tests**
>
> Students in grades 3-8 who took RISE were assigned tests based on course enrollment. Students in Grades 9-10 who [took] Utah Aspire Plus (UA+) were assigned tests based on grade level. For students to be assigned the appropriate test, they must be:
> • Enrolled in a Utah public school,
> • Enrolled for a Full Academic Year (FAY; Enrolled in the same school for ≥ 160 days),
> • Enrolled in courses which have core codes with associated tests (e.g., ELA, math, or science), as sent by the LEA through UTREx, and,
> • Complete the course instruction (applicable to grades 3-8).

Course-Taking

The first two sentences and the third bullet point of this guidance are problematic because students in grades 3-6 typically do not have course enrollment data, which is designated for the first time in UTREx in grade 7. We suspect that the first two sentences should be reversed, so that students in grades 3-8 are assigned to tests based on grade level and students in grades 9-10 are assigned based on course enrollment. This stipulation of linking eligibility to course enrollment is consistent with the EDFacts reporting for grades 9 and 10, which uses the following rules to link course enrollment to eligibility:

If a student is full-time and enrolled in at least one course that makes them eligible for an assessment in the subject areas of English language arts, reading, mathematics, or science, then they are eligible to take tests in all of the subject areas.
If a student is part-time (e.g., home-schooled but taking one course at a public school), then they are eligible to take the Utah Aspire Plus only in those subject areas linked to the courses they have taken.

We obtained the list of Utah Aspire Plus UTREx codes for courses which make students eligible and used those and the EDFacts rules above to determine eligibility. Because this list of codes was specific to 2023-24 and could differ from the codes used in 2019-2023, our estimates for course-based eligibility may differ from official USBE reported rates in previous years.

We struggled to interpret the fourth bullet point in the UATM section on eligibility: "Complete the course instruction (applicable to grades 3-8)." Testing for all statewide assessments, including grades 3-10, typically take place prior to the completion of all course material. Because this bullet point specifies that it applies only to grades 3-8, we disregarded it in considering eligibility for Utah Aspire Plus.

Enrollment

The first bullet point is clear and we used this in our eligibility qualifications: student is enrolled for more than zero days at a public school in Utah in grade 9 or 10. The second bullet point – "Enrolled for a Full Academic Year (FAY; Enrolled in the same school for ≥ 160 days) – is problematic because it would eliminate 10% of students who would otherwise be eligible and it would eliminate 43% of all chronically absent students in 2023-2024 (i.e., who miss 18 or more days). Because we suspect chronic absenteeism is an important predictor in non-participation, we elected not to use this 160-day rule and instead relied on the EDFacts criteria, which require only that a student is enrolled for at least one school day during the testing window. This decision may cause our estimates of participation to deviate from official reported USBE rates of participation.

Participation Codes

Although the heading of Section A of the UATM – "Assigned Tests" – suggests that it provides exclusive and exhaustive information on student eligibility, Section B – "Participation" – may provide additional guidance. This section reads:

> Not all students will begin or complete assigned tests. Participation codes are used to provide an explanation as to why a student did not participate in an assigned test, or why a student participated in a test in a non-standard way. Situations where students may not have taken assigned tests include the following, and should be indicated by the appropriate participation code (see appendix A):
> • Student's parent or guardian requested parental exclusion (204),
> • Student refused to test (106),
> • Student had an unanticipated health emergency (107),
> • Student is an English Learner (EL) and enrolled in the school after April 15th of the current school year (103),
> • The student encountered a test system interruption and was unable to complete the test (208), (Requires USBE authorization)
> • USBE Excused (111; Requires USBE authorization), or,
> • Student is a Foreign Exchange Student (no participation code required).

From these participation codes, we considered the first and second (requested parental exclusion, refusal to test), to be interpreted as the student being *eligible* to test but as offering information about why they may not have *participated*. We did not automatically consider these codes indicative of non-participation because many students with these codes also had valid test scores.

For the other participation codes – health emergencies, English learner enrolling after April 15, test error, USBE excusal, and foreign exchange student – we interpreted these as valid criteria for ineligibility because students with those codes were not expected to participate in the test. For the

foreign exchange student and English learners enrolling after April 15th, our decision aligns with EDFacts criteria for eligibility.

The Section B criteria continues:

> In most cases, if a student's test meets the criteria for a sufficient response, but a participation code indicates that the student did not participate, the student's test is re-coded as Standard Participation (participation code 200, see Appendix A) and is included in the participation rate and accountability calculations for the school.

The language above suggests that under most conditions, a valid score should be considered evidence that a student was both a *participant* and (assuming that no ineligible students should be counted as participating) and also *eligible*. Section B continues:

> Cases where this practice is not used and exclude students from being counted in participation include:
>
> - The student has a valid test score, but the student's participation code indicates the student's parent or guardian requested parental exclusion,
> - A student's participation code indicates the student did not test AND the student's test does not meet the criteria for a sufficient response,
> - The student transfers to another school before or during the testing window before the school had a reasonable opportunity to administer the assessment (112) but has a sufficient response.

The first bullet point above indicates that students with valid scores but who also have a participation code indicating that their parent has excluded them from participation, should not be counted as *participants*. We counted students in that category as *eligible* but not as *participants*. This choice is made in part so that we can examine how parents opting their students out of testing influences participation rates. If we considered opted-out students as ineligible, then we could not investigate this question.

The second bullet point regarding an insufficient response is confusing because it is part of a group of items that assumes a sufficient response (see "In most cases…" above). The third bullet point above is also confusing because it suggests that a student had a sufficient response but also transferred before testing. It is possible that the guidance to disregard such scores is based on the assumption that the Utah Accountability Technical Manual is aimed mostly at facilitating accountability for *schools,* in which case emphasis is placed on whether a school can be considered responsible for a particular student.

Participation Codes: Conclusions

The UATM provides an Appendix A that includes a table of participation codes. One column in that table is "Reporting" and it has values such as "Countable," "Not Countable," "Countable for Participation only," and "Counted in Participation and Growth." We used the "Not Countable" designation from the 2024-25 version of the UATM as indicating that a student was *ineligible.* These codes included the following descriptions:

1. “The student is an English learner (EL) and first enrolled in the U.S. on or after April 15 of current school year.”
2. “Student is unable to test during the testing window due to an unanticipated health circumstance.”
3. “USBE Excused. Requires USBE authorization. Used in rare circumstances to capture irregular test circumstances.”
4. “Student transferred out of school before the LEA had a reasonable opportunity to administer the assessment.”
5. “Student took the assessment with non-allowed modifications which interfere with the validity/reliability of the test”
6. “The test event was interrupted by a system error without reasonable opportunity to reset or re-open the test. USBE Approval required.”

Note that two participation codes *not* in the list above address “Parental Exclusion” (student opted out of testing by parent) – one code referring to cases when a student was opted-out prior to testing and one referring to after. In both cases, we considered these students to be *eligible* but to have not *participated* because of the UATM guidance that these students were to be considered non-participants even when they had a sufficient response on the test (i.e., a valid score).

Appendix B: Characteristics of the Student and Parent Samples

To evaluate how well we achieved our goal of obtaining a sample that was balanced between participants and non-participants and as representative as possible, we created two lookup tables. In the records table, student demographics (gender, race and ethnicity, eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch, English language learner status, and receipt of special education services) were appended to a column of unique random numbers. This table was always stored on a secure, password-protected remote computer in a secure facility with data encrypted at rest. In the email table, names and emails of students or parents were joined to the same column of unique random numbers. When respondents to the survey submitted their survey answers, this unique random number was appended to their responses. After downloading the survey responses to the secure remote computer, they were joined to the records table using the unique random number. Names and emails were never attached to survey responses, preserving the confidentiality of the survey data. Data for parents is only for respondents in the sampling frame, not the social media sample, and reflects the characteristics of their student, not the parents themselves. Characteristics of the samples are reported in Table 3.**Error! Not a valid bookmark self-reference.**

Table 3. Characteristics of Student and Parent Samples

	Students	Parents
n	75	49
% Participated in UT Aspire Plus in 2023-24	75%	78%
% Opted out in 2023-24	20%	20%
% Female	63%	53%
% English language learner	9%	2%
% Eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	33%	31%
% Receiving special education services	7%	10%
% Asian	0%	0%
% Black	1%	0%
% Hispanic	24%	12%
% Indigenous / Native American	0%	0%
% Pacific Islander	4%	0%
% White	69%	88%

Appendix C: Multilevel Modeling Details

All analyses were conducted using *R* (Version 4.4.0), the statistical programming language. For each of our multilevel models, we used the lme4 package. To construct our model with all grades included, we divided our model-building process into two phases[71] The first phase, called the unconditional model phase, is to determine the fixed effects and random effects structure that best fit the relationship between grade level and student participation. During the second phase, called the conditional model phase, predictors of interest are added to the model that was selected from the unconditional model phase. Selecting the best model from the unconditional model phase is not an exact science. We used likelihood ratio tests, plots of the participation rate across grade level, AIC (Akaike information criterion) and BIC (Bayesian information criterion) to determine the best model. For our model, we included two random effects: (1) random intercept for students, and (2) random intercept for the school. Note that because students can be in different schools in different years, we used a partial-crossed random effects structure for the two random effects.

For our model examining participation across 4th through 10th grade, we ultimately selected a model with the two random intercepts (students and schools), a fixed slope, and a fixed quadratic term. Though this model indicated that it failed to converge, we used the gold standard approach of fitting the model using all available estimators and comparing the results. When we did so, we found that all effects were similar, and thus concluded that the warning about the failure to converge was a false positive. This was also true of our conditional model. For the conditional model, we included the following predictors: grade level, grade is 9th or 10th (binary variable), quadratic grade level term, chronically absent status (binary variable), cumulative GPA, gender (binary variable), free/reduced-price lunch status (binary variable), English-language learner status (binary variable), student race (factor variable with 7 levels: White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, and Multiracial), school remoteness (higher number = more rural), school's Title I status (factor with 3 levels: not Title I, partial Title I, full Title I), school's enrollment size, school charter status (binary variable), school online status (binary variable), and student's special education status (binary variable).

For our model examining participation in only 9th and 10th grade, we removed the quadratic term for grade level (because there were only two grades, which by definition cannot have quadratic growth). Otherwise, the predictors were the same as those included in our first model, except for one change: instead of using a factor for race with 7 levels, we turned it into a binary variable indicating whether the student identified as White or not, which preliminary testing indicated accounted for most of the variation by race or ethnicity.

[71] Bryk, A. S., & Raudenbush, S. W. (1987). Application of hierarchical linear models to assessing change. *Psychological Bulletin*.

Appendix D: Interview Protocols

Parent Interview Protocol

1. Introduction (3 minutes)
    a. "The Utah State Board of Education is interested in learning more about parent opinions regarding student participation in the Utah Aspire Plus test, which is the state test in English, reading, math, and science that students in 9th and 10th grade take at the end of the school year. The Utah State Board of Education hired my organization, the Utah Education Policy Center, as an external agency to conduct a study to better understand parents' opinions and experiences related to the Aspire Plus test.
    b. Consent process
    c. Provide consent form (or send prior to interview via email or Calendly). Consent form will address confidentiality: neither names nor any identifying information of participants will be included in any written or oral reports.
        i. Remind participant that their participation is voluntary and that any quotes used from the interviews will be de-identified.
        ii. "Do I have your permission to record this conversation?"
            1. If Yes: Begin recording
            2. If No: Proceed without recording
2. Confirm Student Participation (1-2 minutes)
    a. "Did your student take the Utah Aspire Plus test last year during 9th or 10th grade?"
        i. If No: Can you tell me a bit about the reasons why your student did not take the assessment?
            1. If they say they opted out: go to protocol section 3.a
            2. If they give a different reason or are not willing to share: go to section ii-1 below.
        ii. If Yes or Unsure (5-7 minutes):
            1. "Could you share any opinions you may have regarding the value of the Utah Aspire Plus Assessment?
            2. "What events, experiences, or sources of information have informed your beliefs about this assessment?"
            3. "Could you describe any concerns that you may have had about your student's participation in the Utah Aspire Plus assessment?

    [Continue to Section 4 below.]
3. Opt-Out Decision-Making Process (7-10 minutes)
    a. "Could you describe what prompted you to consider opting your student out of the Utah Aspire Plus assessment?"
    b. (Optional) Prompts used to encourage elaboration if parent's answer to (a) is brief:
        i. "What sources of information did you consider when making this decision?"

ii. "Can you describe any events or experiences that may have influenced your views on the Utah Aspire Plus assessment?"
iii. "Could you describe any concerns that you may have about your student's participation in the Utah Aspire Plus assessment?"
iv. "Of the reasons you've mentioned, which would you say was the most important in your decision and why?"

c. [Possible probes if parent doesn't mention a clear reason:]
i. "How do you feel this assessment impacts instructional time, if at all?"
ii. "What concerns, if any, do you have about how this assessment might influence curricular or instructional decisions?"
iii. "What concerns, if any, do you have about student privacy related to this assessment?"
iv. "What concerns do you have, if any, about how this assessment may impact the high school or post-secondary choices your child has?"

4. What else would you like to share about what the school, district, or state could do or change that you believe would expand students' participation in this assessment?
5. Closing (2 minutes)
    a. What else would you like to share about your thoughts on the Aspire Plus test?
    b. "Thank you for sharing your time and insights about this important issue."

Administrator Interview Protocol

Introduction (3 minutes)

a. Thank the administrator for participating in the interview
b. Background on this study: "The state is interested in learning more about parent opinions regarding participation in the Utah Aspire Plus test, which is the state test in English, reading, math, and science that students in 9th and 10th grade take at the end of the school year."
c. Briefly explain the purpose of the interview: "The Utah State Board of Education hired my organization, the Utah Education Policy Center, as an external agency to conduct a study to better understand parents' opinions and experiences related to the Aspire Plus test. Would you be willing to answer a few questions for this study? It should take less than 20 minutes, and your answers will remain confidential."
d. Provide consent form (or send prior to interview via email or Calendly). Consent form will address confidentiality: neither names nor any identifying information of participants will be included in any written or oral reports.
e. Confirm the expected interview duration of 15-20 minutes

Prompts:

1. “What are some of the reasons parents at your school/district cite for opting their children out of the Aspire Plus assessment?”
    a. Probes
        i. Can you describe any trends, patterns, or shifts you’ve noticed in the reasons for opt-out?
        ii. Of the reasons you mentioned, which are the most common and why?
2. “What policies, procedures, or other factors in place at your school/district that could be influencing parents’ decisions to opt their children out of this assessment?”
3. “What other explanations might you have about why students are opted out of the Aspire Plus assessment?”
4. “What could the school, district, or state could do or change that you believe would expand student participation in this assessment, if anything?”
5. “Could you share anything else that could be helpful for the USBE to know about parent attitudes toward the Utah Aspire Plus test that we haven’t already covered?”

Appendix E: Survey Questions

School Assessment Coordinator Survey

1. For the 2023-24 Utah Aspire Plus assessments, what was your school's or district's attendance policy for students who were not planning to take the test?
    - Students had to attend school in-person
    - Students had to attend school virtually
    - Students were excused from school on test day
    - Other (please explain) _____

2. What a student is absent during the regularly scheduled testing day, what efforts are made for the student to make up that test?
    - Make-up tests are scheduled for students who were absent.
    - None; students who miss the testing day do not take the test.
    - Other (please explain) _____

3. Based on the feedback you have received, how much do you think **parents** of students at your school agree that the Utah Aspire Plus test... [Response Options: Strongly Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Somewhat Agree, Strongly Agree]
    - ...tells them something important about a school's overall quality.
    - ...reflects the quality of their student's education experience.
    - ...evaluates their student's knowledge and skills in English, reading, mathematics, and science.
    - ...helps the state identify schools that need improvement.
    - ...helps identify teachers whose students are learning well or poorly.
    - ...helps identify achievement gaps between groups of students.
    - ...is too stressful for students.
    - ...takes up too much instructional time.
    - ...makes schools focus on tested subjects at the expense of arts, music, and applied areas.
    - ...diverts money from schools to the businesses that make the tests.
    - ...puts private student data at risk.

4. What policies or structural factors at your school reduce student participation in Utah Aspire Plus? [Open-ended response]

5. What else would be helpful for the USBE to know about parent attitudes toward the Utah Aspire Plus test? [Open-ended response]

Teacher Survey

1. Please indicate your agreement with the following statements about the results of the Utah Aspire Plus test: [Response Options: Strongly Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Somewhat Agree, Strongly Agree]
    a. I use the student results on the Utah Aspire Plus to inform my teaching.
    b. I talk with students about their personal results on the Utah Aspire Plus test

2. Please describe other ways you use the Utah Aspire Plus test results. [Open-ended response]

3. Please indicate your agreement with the following statements about the Utah Aspire Plus test. In my opinion, the Utah Aspire Plus test... [Response Options: Strongly Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Somewhat Agree, Strongly Agree]
    a. ...tells me something important about a school's overall quality.
    b. ...reflects the quality of a student's education experience.
    c. ...evaluates a student's knowledge and skills in English, reading, mathematics, and science.
    d. ...helps the state identify schools that need improvement.
    e. ...helps identify teachers whose students are learning well or poorly.
    f. ...helps identify achievement gaps between groups of students.
    g. ...is too stressful for students.
    h. ...takes up too much instructional time.
    i. ...makes schools focus on tested subjects at the expense of arts, music, and applied areas.
    j. ...diverts money from schools to the businesses that make the tests.
    k. ...puts private student data at risk.

4. Is there anything else you would like us to know about the Utah Aspire Plus test? [Open-ended response]

Parent Survey

1. Utah Aspire Plus is the state end-of-year assessment for students in 9th and 10th grades and covers English, reading, mathematics, and science. In my opinion, the Utah Aspire Plus test... [Response Options: Strongly Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Somewhat Agree, Strongly Agree]
    a. ...tells me something important about a school's overall quality.
    b. ...reflects the quality of my student's education experience.
    c. ...evaluates my student's knowledge and skills in English, reading, mathematics, and science.
    d. ...helps the state identify schools that need improvement.
    e. ...helps identify teachers whose students are learning well or poorly.
    f. ...helps identify achievement gaps between groups of students.
    g. ...is too stressful for students.
    h. ...takes up too much instructional time.
    i. ...makes schools focus on tested subjects at the expense of arts, music, and applied areas.
    j. ...diverts money from schools to the businesses that make the tests.
    k. ...puts private student data at risk.

2. Please indicate your agreement with the following statements about the results of the Utah Aspire Plus test: [Response Options: Strongly Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Somewhat Agree, Strongly Agree]
    a. The results from the Utah Aspire Plus help me understand my student's learning.
    b. I talk with my student about his or her personal results on the Utah Aspire Plus test.

3. [If the parent has a student in 9th or 10th grade] My student will take the Utah Aspire Plus test this school year (in spring of 2025). [Response Options: Strongly Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Somewhat Agree, Strongly Agree]

4. [If the parent selected Strongly Disagree or Somewhat Disagree on Question #3] My student will not take the Utah Aspire Plus test this year because... [Open-ended response]

5. Is there anything else you would like us to know about your attitudes toward the Utah Aspire Plus test? [Open-ended response]

Student Survey

1. Please indicate your agreement with the following statements about the Utah Aspire Plus assessment. [Response Options: Strongly Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Somewhat Agree, Strongly Agree]
    a. A school's average test score says something about the school's overall quality.
    b. The Utah Aspire Plus test measures how much students are learning.
    c. The Utah Aspire Plus test provided me with useful feedback on my learning.
    d. When I take a standardized test, I try to do my best.
    e. Taking standardized tests is stressful.

2. Please indicate your agreement with the following statements about your school. [Response Options: Strongly Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Somewhat Agree, Strongly Agree]
    a. I feel welcome at my school.
    b. School is giving me skills that I need to succeed.
    c. One of my teachers cares about me as a person.

3. I plan to take the Utah Aspire Plus test this school year (in spring of 2025). [Response Options: Strongly Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Somewhat Agree, Strongly Agree]

4. Please tell us more about why you do not plan to take the Utah Aspire Plus test this year. [Open-ended response]

5. Is there anything else you would like us to know about your attitudes toward the Utah Aspire Plus test? [Open-ended response]

Appendix F: Review of Annual Test Observation Data

The methodology for the test observations is described above in Section 2. There were 15 observations of the Utah Aspire Plus (UA+) at five LEAs in 2021-22 and 18 observations at five LEAs in 2022-23. Our review of the observations indicates that **UA+ administration tends to proceed smoothly and is not a major barrier to participation**. The relatively infrequent occurrences of complications are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Summary of Complications Observed during Annual Test Observations

Administration Observation	Summary
Routine Complications	In both 2022 and 2023, observers noted routine complications during the test: students whose devices ran out of battery power, students who were disconnected from the assessment before they had finished, or students who had no headphones or who struggled to connect their headphones correctly. These were all handled by the test proctor with minimal disruption.
Late Arrivals, Early Departures	In both 2022 and 2023, observers noted some struggles with disruptions caused by students who arrived late (and whose timing would be different from the rest of the students) or who were taking the assessment in only one subject and left early.
Testing Security	In 2021-22, two observers at one site noted concerns with testing security because students who had finished the assessment were using their personal smartphones, playing games on their school-issued laptops, or whispering to one another while other students were still completing the assessment. This was in contrast to other sites, where observers noted protocols for preventing the use of personal devices during testing and clear communication of expectations for what students should do after they are finished with the assessment.
Students from Online Schools	In 2022-23, there were no such concerns about testing security, but one observer noted that students from an online school may have faced some additional challenges because they were testing in an unfamiliar location where they hadn't received instruction. Challenges for assessment that are specific to students attending online schools are further elaborated in Section 5 below.

If any recommendations were to be taken from these data, we suggest that assessment coordinators share strategies for troubleshooting the most commonly encountered complications because those are likely to affect the most students. These include taking steps to ensure that students' test-taking technology (e.g., school iPads) have all the necessary software installed prior to assessment and that

assessment locations have an ample supply of extra charging equipment. The second most common complaint was from disruptions due to students arriving late or leaving early. Assessment coordinators might consider planning for these contingencies such as by arranging for seating near the door to be reserved for late-arriving students.