Knox County Teachers, Parents and Students Push Testing Rollback

Based on interview with Lauren Hopson, President, Knox County Education Association, follow-up with new KCEA President Tanya Coats, and website reviews.

The Knox County, Tennessee, Education Association (KCEA) has won a majority on the school board that supports less testing, including ending testing in grades K-2 and cutting district mandated testing. The union also initiated a school board resolution that called on the state to halt the use of student test scores in teacher evaluations. Knox County, which includes Knoxville, the state capitol, is the third most populous county in the state. Thus, local reforms garner statewide attention.

The key to these policy victories, explained union President Lauren Hopson, was electing a board with seven of nine members as allies. This led the superintendent, a graduate of the pro-corporate reform Broad Academy, to resign. The union has a good relationship with the current superintendent.

An initial effort against testing focused on grades K-2. One untenured teacher who led opposition to this testing had her contract non-renewed. Hopson said, “We needed to stop retaliation, but it was too late for this woman.” They realized they would have to change the school board.

Teachers and their allies started a group, Students, Parents and Educators Across Knox County (SPEAK). They made a tactical decision to not work directly through the union but instead through the broader organization. The group, which meets monthly, grew to 3000 members, primarily teachers. Twice they showed the movie Standardized: Lies, Money, & Civil Rights: How Testing Is Ruining Public Education. Hopson explained, “We went to a school board meeting 350 strong, and 25 of us spoke, including some union members.” SPEAK also organized rallies against charters and to defend the fired teacher. Union activists include members of BATS (Bad Ass Teachers).

Board meetings are televised. When SPEAK testified, they copied the speech and put it on their Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/groups/SPEAKTN/). They built good relations with smaller radio stations and weekly newspapers, who provided accurate and sympathetic coverage. They would organize five or six people at time to call in to talk shows.

Many parents supported the campaign. Students known as the “Gang of 4.0” – college-bound students with top grades – also spoke at school board meetings. Student Ethan Young’s video against Common Core drew 2.5 million views (available on YouTube).

“Grassroots organizations like SPEAK, Save Our Schools and Jobs with Justice of East Tennessee have become vital collaborative partners in our quest to achieve equity for Public Education,” said new KCEA President Tanya Coats.
The union Political Action Committee (PAC) interviewed school board candidates, and SPEAK backed the union-endorsed slate. They posted campaign signs, canvassed and phone banked. Over the course of three elections, the governor, who supported the pro-testing board, put up $40,000 to oppose the SPEAK/union slate, but he kept losing. By the third election, Hopson said, seven of the nine were allies.

Superintendent Jim McIntyre was a major problem. Hopson said that KCEA and SPEAK focused on criticizing his ideas, not the person. McIntyre hung his hat on test score growth. But when a top high school fell from level 5 to level 1 (the worst), he did not defend the school because then he’d be attacking his own policies. The public recognized he would endanger schools to promote his views. McIntyre brought in Broad fellows with six-figure salaries. One hiring was illegal, so they exposed it. That, said Hopson, was a turning point. (The Broad Foundation trains prospective administrators who support test-driven schooling.)

SPEAK also developed relationships with the county commissioners, who provide oversight on school funding. SPEAK and KCEA exposed McIntyre’s misuse of educational funds. He had spent significant amounts on consulting firms like Parthenon, but only got cookie-cutter recommendations. Hopson said, “It was a waste of money, so the Commissioners turned against him.” Ultimately, McIntyre resigned.

The new superintendent, Bob Thomas, wants to overhaul state policy on teacher evaluation, which relies heavily on student test scores. The union says the county should take the lead to push the state. The Knox County School board passed resolutions two years in a row calling on the state to stop using student scores in teacher evaluation. The state has not listened.

Hopson contends that state testing is a mess. There have been serious problems with both paper and computerized exams. Results come back too late to be helpful. In October 2017, Tennessee Education Association spokesman Jim Wrye pointed out, “This makes the fourth year in a row where major problems have surfaced in a system where there are a lot of high-stakes consequences for students, teachers, and schools based on test scores.” The union’s goal is to persuade legislators to halt the use of tests to judge teachers. They plan to make it a fiscal issue: “We do not need to spend money this way,” said Hopson.

KCEA supports parent/student opt outs. In 2016, with a paper-and-pencil state test, there were about 500 opt outs of some 60,000 students. Refusal is difficult because test results are included in grades. Removal of that policy is another union target. KCEA did expect more refusals in 2017 than actually happened. In part, this may be due to the state exam being administered on computers over six weeks. The choice was to keep kids home for a long period or subject them to “sit and stare” in front of a computer.

Knox County has largely ended district-mandated testing, but Tennessee mandates much more than the federal government minimum. State requirements include both interim (“universal screening”) tests for most students in grades 3-11, and nine high school end-of-course exams. In Knox, individual teachers now decide what assessments to use in addition to the state mandates. No schools require additional interim tests.
Hopson added that most teachers probably use “regular old testing,” but some use projects or portfolios. Schools with lower scores probably doing more “drill and kill”; those with higher scores have more flexibility.

The state also mandates portfolios in pre-K and Kindergarten, which were piloted in Knox County. Coats said, “Educators were perfectly fine with the tool, but when it went to the state, the tool was tweaked and revised where it was unrecognizable.” The problems included “too many standards merged together, age inappropriateness, scoring guide not matching standards,” and technology problems. Perhaps worse, the state intends to “use the data as punishment for educators.” As a result, the union persuaded the board to drop the portfolio pilot for other grades and to pass a resolution calling on the state to drop the mandate. In other cases over the years, over-reaching state mandates have undermined teacher-led, high-quality assessments, causing teachers to end up opposing what they created.

The state-mandated screening tests, explained Hopson, are a continuing problem in large part because of the low-quality interventions that schools are supposed to implement. For example, low-scoring middle school students may miss art and music to do more math and reading. At any time during the year, students with low scores can be pulled out of regular classes to take these “specials.” These test-triggered interventions can take regular teachers away from their usual classroom work for up to nine weeks in which students mostly work on their own while the teacher performs the state-prescribed reading and math interventions. Some middle schools refuse to engage in this practice. Meanwhile, across the district, students often don’t receive supplemental resources they actually need.

**Lessons**

The key to rolling back testing overkill was taking control of the school board. Hopson thinks the resolution calling for an end to evaluating teachers based on test scores will gain a lot of traction after years of exam administration failures. Some legislators are getting frustrated.

KCEA advice is to start with the school board. Form a coalition with parents, students and other allies, as KCEA did very effectively.

Don’t be afraid to spend money. “We had $20K in our PAC and spent it down to $1K at the end, but we got good results. Go against big money, don’t be afraid. We won two of four seats on our first try, then won all the contested seats in last election. If big money is coming in, make a big deal of it.”