A Resistance Victory in Las Cruces, NM

This study is based on interviews and correspondence with Bruce Hartman, president of NEA-Las Cruces, with help from Amy Simpson of the NEA and School Board president Maria Flores, plus documents and news clips.

NEA-Las Cruces (NEA-LC) won an end to Las Cruces district-mandated testing by helping to build a movement of teachers, parents, students and other allies, then winning school board elections that led to a new superintendent who has implemented a moratorium on district-mandated testing. The union also persuaded the district to implement an Alternative Demonstration of Competency (ADC) allowing students who didn't pass all the state mandated graduation tests to still graduate.

With allies across the state, including other local unions and thousands of students, NEA-LC also persuaded the state to reduce time spent on the PARCC exams and stop mandating the use of interim tests in high school. (These are tests administered periodically each year before the major state exam, and are also called benchmark, period, short cycle and other names.) 2017 was the third year with reduced high school short cycle testing and the first year of reduced time on PARCC testing. Next year will see another small reduction in time spent on PARCC.

The NEA affiliate began by talking to teachers, parents and students. It surveyed teachers to collect accurate data on how much testing was happening. The union used that information to execute a broad community-based organizing and education campaign initially called “Less Testing, More Teaching” and later “Time to Learn, Time to Teach.”

How it came about, step by step:

The effort started in 2013 with school-based conversations, including parents and students discussing issues such as teacher evaluations. (Patrick Sanchez was NEA-LC president in 2013.) Current NEA-LC President Bruce Hartman said that at the time, it was “test, test, test” in the district.

After a few meetings, the union decided to focus on reducing testing. Other pressing issues were also raised, such as the threat of school privatization, as well as privacy and data mining.

A group formed called People Against the Standardization of Students. They created Facebook and web pages and used social media, flyers and word of mouth to spread the message. They organized a November 2013 rally against excessive testing that drew more than 800 people in a community of 105,000. Speakers included legislators and school board members. They then gathered 1,000 signatures on a petition sent to the governor and secretary of education, calling for a testing reduction.
One result of the upsurge was winning the ADC. This was a crucial victory because, had the ADC not been in place, more than one-third of Las Cruces Public Schools (LCPS) 2013-14 seniors would not have graduated. The NM Public Education Department had recently changed the graduation requirements to include standardized tests. This created the perfect storm of anti-testing sentiment from parents, educators, and students. Under the statute, all districts were to have an ADC, but most did not. NEA-LC shared ADCs from Santa Fe and Truth or Consequences with the district leadership and convinced them that they needed to create one. Though LCPS’ wasn’t as strong as NEA-LC recommended, it was a very important step forward.

In response to the activism, the board had the district post information on its website, in Spanish and English, about parents right to opt their children out of testing. (The district is more than three-quarters Hispanic.)

With the help of the National Education Association, NEA-LC developed effective messaging. Monthly meetings, held after school, continued over the course of a year. They included NEA-LC members, parents and some students, with turnout varying from 20 to 25 people. There was support from business people, though they identified themselves as parents, not business owners. There was little opposition to the campaign since most people shared the view there was too much testing.

In February 2014, the union surveyed educators about testing, with 522 members of the bargaining unit responding. They addressed which tests were given and how often in each grade. They asked about the impact, including how it affected students and staff. They compiled the results, prepared a PowerPoint, and presented it to the school board, asking them to reduce testing.

A group called Students against Testing organized an opt-out group. In March 2015, there were large student walkouts of 500 students at the high school and middle school. One school’s walkout was covered by the Washington Post. Thousands of students also participated in walkouts and opt-outs in Santa Fe, and Albuquerque. The walkouts targeted the state-mandated PARCC exam and contributed to reductions in the length of PARCC.
NEA-LC had many other key allies, including a Las Cruces group called Las Cruces Refuse the Tests, which was connected to New Mexico Refuse the Tests, a local chapter of United Opt Out National.

In 2015, two school board seats were up for reelection. NEA-Las Cruces endorsed and supported two new candidates, who won. That meant they could expect the support of a 3-2 majority on the board. They elected Maria Flores as board president; she is a long-time parent activist, including on test refusal, and had been a bilingual teacher. The union-supported board members gained a 5-0 majority in the February 2017 elections.

The new superintendent, Dr. Greg Ewing, who started in December 2016, is “wonderful,” says Hartman. Ewing said publicly he doesn’t believe in testing beyond the state and federal mandates and issued a directive implementing a moratorium on district-mandated testing. The moratorium allowed schools to continue to use those or similar tests, and many did. At an October 2017 meeting, Ewing encouraged the principals to eliminate tests that are not required. Hartman explained, “At the January principals meeting all the principals are going to have breakout sessions to develop a school plan to only administer state/federal mandated assessments.” Ewing also opposed the state PARCC test and, said Hartman, “does not want schools to concern themselves about the test scores.”

In 2017, the school board also passed a resolution against excessive state testing and sent it to the New Mexico School Boards Association. The association looked through several local resolutions and sent strong ones to the legislature.

Remaining problems

One continuing problem is school use of “site tests.” Under the superintendent’s leadership, principals must now compile a list of all these tests. They often take the form of common “formative assessments” based on state and Common Core standards. They are developed at school level by teachers or grade levels, or sometimes a group of schools. These are excessive, often administered once a week or every two weeks. There are more in elementary school, less at middle and still less at high school. “They are really abused at the elementary level,” says Hartman.

A very large problem is that New Mexico continues to mandate many more tests than ESSA requires. These include early grades testing three times per year and a battery of high school end-of-course exams.

Advice for other unions

Surveys are of great importance, NEA-Las Cruces concludes. “Develop a good objective survey to find out problems and identify issues,” said Hartman. It should be done before starting a
The Las Cruces survey asked its members the names of assessments, how often they were used, how much time they take to administer, how effective or ineffective the tests were in informing instruction, what kinds of teacher-created assessments they used, and the effects on students and staff. They cautioned to always keep it focused on the consequences for students. (FairTest worked with NCUEA to design such a survey.)

As in other jurisdictions, building alliances and organizing the community was vital. NEA-LC took the lead in organizing for less testing, but it had many key allies.

Winning the school board election was decisive for future progress, though activism had already gained victories.


Middle School students protest over PARCC testing in Las Cruces.