Sacramento Bargains for Change

This study is based on interviews with Nikki Milevsky, former President and now VP; David Fisher, former VP and now President; and John Borsos, Executive Director, Sacramento City Teachers Association (SCTA).

It wasn’t quick or easy, but Sacramento, CA, educators used the contract bargaining process to win a major revamp of how district assessments are determined. The Sacramento City Teachers Association (SCTA) 60-member bargaining team won their agreement in November 2016. It says that, beyond state and federal mandated assessments, the district will not be able to unilaterally impose testing but must go through a binding dispute resolution process.

How did it come about, step by step?

- SCTA members were motivated by the district’s time-consuming benchmark testing to make testing a major part of their bargaining process. The status quo ante was three online benchmark tests per grade level, with an optional fourth exam. There were fewer exams in high school.
- The union did several rounds of member surveys, which revealed just how much teachers detested the benchmark exams. They were not aligned with the curriculum and took far too much time to administer and score. They also lacked adequate technology to administer the tests, and there was excessive stress on students.
- The union made testing part of its broader contract campaign. It held a community forum, for parents and teachers, on the contract bargaining, with a panel on testing.
- Educators held screenings of the documentary film Standardized: Lies, Money, & Civil Rights: How Testing Is Ruining Public Education, where students talked about the negative impact of testing.
- When the district decided unilaterally to keep the benchmark tests, despite widespread expressions of dissatisfaction, the decision galvanized a strong community response that ultimately led to the agreement.
- The union brought testing into the bargaining process, leading to several months of back and forth negotiations. In the end, SCTA and the district agreed on a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that detailed a binding process for determining how tests would be used. If the district and the union fail to agree on an assessment, the decision will be made through a mediation process.
process with a three-person fact finding panel including a representative of the union, one from the district and a neutral third person selected by both parties.

- The MOU also called for the appointment of an Assessment Committee with union and district representatives “to design a comprehensive and balanced system for monitoring student progress.” The committee began meeting in January 2017 and developed a grid with detailed data on district tests, what they were used for and the amount of time they required. The assessment committee went through the grid, one test at a time, to decide if each test was necessary and meaningful. They learned that the district’s justifications were malleable and changing, which opened the door for educators’ input.

- The MOU also limits district benchmark testing to the period between Nov. 7 and Dec. 16 and specifies that the district put opt-out information on its web site.

What are the remaining problems/issues?

The SCTA has not yet worked through all the tests administered by the district. One unresolved issue is the state’s use of Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) exams to meet federal mandates under the Every Student Succeeds Act. And then there are other tests the district said are based on “suggestions” in state law, for instance, a high school math placement test after Math 1. State law says there should be a test after grade 9. But Math 1 can be taken in grade 9, 10 or 11. So the district is not in compliance with state law. This led to a 1.5-hour debate on the purpose of this test. Meanwhile, the MOU agreement on testing is already in effect, although the contract fight continues. (Update: On Nov. 1, SCTA and the district reached a settlement, awaiting approval votes.)

Union leaders say the assessment committee’s work going forward is likely to ebb and flow. Other priorities may arise, and teachers will need professional learning to address their students’ needs.

Advice for other organizations

- Focus on teacher feedback on assessment, whether testing is useful or not, what kids endure. It is a valuable bargaining tool.
- Spend time going into schools and talking with teachers.
- Use surveys as a validation of face-to-face interviews. Data can be collected via surveys more than once.
- Create electronic surveys with space to write comments so that anecdotes can be collected.
- Hold community forums and screenings of films like Standardized, where parents and students can talk.
- Demand that testing be included in bargaining, under the topic of working conditions.