San Diego Slashes Testing

Based on an interview with Lindsay Burningham, President, San Diego Education Association, survey results and contract language about testing.

The San Diego Education Association (SDEA) led a successful campaign to end district-mandated tests. They organized teachers, reached out to parents and the community, held rallies, and prevailed with the school board, despite administration opposition. Teachers now control in-school assessment; some are moving to adopt performance assessments. The NEA affiliate also seeks to include testing reduction and teacher-controlled assessing in their contract.

Union President Lindsay Burningham said they responded to teacher concerns about over-testing by surveying their members. (About 10% responded.) The responses highlighted excessive testing time, lack of accuracy and discriminatory consequences.

SDEA presented the results to the Board of Education, which formed a committee of teachers, parents and administrators to review the testing.

They quickly won an end to kindergarten testing, but most tests remained, including multiple district-required tests in some grades.

SDEA also supported test refusal as a tactic. Opting out is explicitly allowed under California law. The California Teachers Association provided materials on how to refuse testing and teachers’ rights under the law.

SDEA joined the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS) Days of Action, tailoring the group’s national demands to local issues, with a focus on testing. AROS has organized several Days of Action over the past few years, in which local unions and other groups take actions to build support for positive reforms, from budget issues to testing.

For the Days of Action, the union focused on the idea that “students deserve more teaching and learning, less testing.” Beforehand, SDEA held representatives’ council discussions, and then engaged rank-and-file teachers in conversations at their schools. On the first day, teachers and parents held a “walk in” (as was done in many cities), in which parents and other community members joined students and staff, walking into schools together to show support for public education, with the message: “these are our schools.” Because the demand to cut testing and increase time for learning reflected teacher and community concerns, it was difficult for the district to resist.

The second Day of Action, May 4, 2016, focused on testing. At 10 percent of the schools, teachers made posters and flyers and some shared opt-out materials, which sparked discussions.

That very day, the district issued a press release stating it would end district and site-based citywide tests. These included literacy, math and science benchmark tests and the use of the Diagnostic Reading Assessment (DRA).
Non-state assessment is now left entirely to schools. They can use DRA or design their own. Many sites are working on performance-based tasks, project-based learning, observations or portfolios.

This victory was led and won by the teachers union. Parent and community groups were not as actively involved in the testing fight, though some participated in the Days of Action. Teachers who are parents were active in talking about testing with other parents. Civil rights and business groups were not involved in the discussions with the board.

SDEA wants the next contract to include language saying the district will not mandate assessments but, at each school, administrators and teachers will develop assessments together.

However, there is motion on the part of the district to adopt computer-based curriculum-plus-test programs. Teachers are resisting this move. Teachers have the authority to craft their own curricula as well as assessments. There are also workload limit guidelines, which the programs often exceed, so the union can organize against it.

SDEA talks regularly with the instructional department and meets monthly with the superintendent and the deputy to address issues like the computer-based programs. Another issue is the new English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC). In Spring 2017, the union met with the district to focus on minimizing the impact of ELPAC on teaching and learning as well as to help educators prepare for it.

- One key conclusion the union draws from this campaign is the importance of the survey, which provided data to complement the stories teachers told.
- Framing clear messages was also important.


Nicole Coca holds sign at the rally. Photo Credit: San Diego Education Association.