Santa Fe Uses a Range of Tactics to Win

Based on interviews with and documents from Amy Simpson, National Education Association (NEA) Organizational Specialist, and Santa Fe Superintendent Dr. Veronica Garcia.

Santa Fe won a suspension of district-mandated testing after more than two years of organized activism led by NEA-Santa Fe and a change in district leadership. The building blocks for success included direct action by thousands of students and teachers, teacher surveys about testing (and the former superintendent), public records requests, protests at the New Mexico State House, a lawsuit, and a vote of no confidence in the former superintendent, which led to a positive change in leadership.

This timeline shows the sequence of events contributing to the victory, according to Amy Simpson of the NEA:

- **April 2015:** Thousands of students walked out of PARCC testing in Santa Fe and other New Mexico districts. (Approximately 10,000 students opted out of testing in New Mexico in 2015.) It was the first year New Mexico planned to give the PARCC exams and use the results to judge schools and evaluate teachers. Students said the tests were unfair because they were timed, given on computers, and tested material that they had not learned.

- **June 2015:** Teachers burned evaluations based on Value Added Model (VAM) test scores. New Mexico Public Education Secretary Hanna Skandera had imposed the teacher evaluation system based on student test scores beginning in 2013-14, after the NM legislature failed to approve the system. Teachers said the evaluations were not fair and did not reflect their value as educators.

- **October 2015:** A New Mexico Time to Learn organizing committee was formed in Santa Fe, drafting a plan for site-based organizing around testing and evaluations. The goals were to build organizational power and capacity to lift up parent and educator voices, reduce testing and increase authentic teacher-created assessments. The 10-step plan included educator, parent and community surveys, meetings and forums about alternatives to the current system, and collecting educator, parent and student stories to share with the public. It culminated with lobby days at the State House in February.

- **January 2016:** NEA-SF surveyed 351 Santa Fe elementary, middle and high school teachers about testing and teacher evaluations in the district. The survey showed that 36% said 26 days or more were impacted by mandated standardized assessments. (Forty-one percent said 11-25 days were affected.) Clear majorities of the respondents said mandatory “short-cycle” tests such as Discovery and DIBELS were not useful in informing instruction.

- **January 2016:** NEA-SF made Freedom of Information Act requests about costs of testing in the district, including all contracts and the amount paid to companies.
providing student testing and diagnostic programs to the Santa Fe School District from 2013-2016.

- **February 2016:** NEA-SF installed Joy of Learning Art Chairs at the New Mexico statehouse to signify what students miss out on when they are constantly tested. A press release quoted Grace Meyer, middle school art teacher and NEA-SF president: “Less testing could mean more arts and music — as represented by the art and music chair; more ecology and science learning — as represented by the nature chair; more joyful reading as represented by the Dr. Seuss chair; and more cultural literacy education — as represented by the unity chair.”

- **March 2016:** ACLU filed a lawsuit (with the NEA-SF union leader as plaintiff) against NM Public Education Department (PED) for its gag order on teachers regarding testing. The PED order said public education employees must not “disparage or diminish the significance, importance or use of standardized tests.” Penalties could include “suspension or revocation of a person’s educator or administrator licensure or other PED license.”

- **April 2016:** NEA-SF presented testing survey results and costs of testing to the Santa Fe school board. NEA-SF made seven recommendations, including eliminating all non-state mandated district testing and allowing non-standardized, authentic options to replace standardized tests where possible.

- **May 2016:** A judge ruled in favor of teachers and lifted the gag order on testing.

- **May 2016:** NEA-SF sent out a survey to teachers evaluating the superintendent. Teachers overwhelmingly called for a no-confidence recommendation.

- **June 2016:** NEA-SF presented to the school board results of the survey about the Superintendent.

- **July 2016:** Santa Fe Superintendent resigned.

- **August 2016:** Santa Fe hired Superintendent Dr. Veronica Garcia, who was very popular, knowledgeable, and supportive of teachers. She was the former New Mexico Public Education Department Secretary under Democratic Governor Bill Richardson.
September 2016: Superintendent Garcia announced a freeze on non-mandated district tests. In a memo to principals, Garcia said the decision responded to the consistent concerns she had heard about lost instructional time from testing. The district’s analysis showed the tests did not lead to academic improvement. She also announced the formation of a task force including teachers, principals and district staff to address issues around the effectiveness of non-mandated tests and make recommendations for their use.

Next Steps for the New Superintendent

In an interview, Dr. Garcia explained that she set up a task force with the union, teachers, and district staff. In a day-long meeting, they reviewed testing requirements. Many were required by the state, but the district still had many after ending the short cycle tests.

Garcia said the district will use NWEA tests in the 2017-18 school year, but it is not mandated and schools may not administer it more than three times a year. “Beyond that, I don’t think testing will have a positive impact on student achievement.” If NWEA does not produce improvement, Garcia said they could abandon it. Moreover, “We are discouraging schools from developing their own short-cycle tests to use like NWEA.”

Regarding performance assessments, Garcia said the district encourages teacher-made assessments. She said the new NWEA is improved but is not performance assessment. “Rubrics can be helpful, teachers can design them. Problem is, there is so little time for planning and collaboration to create that.”

Garcia said state testing is still a concern, especially in kindergarten through second grade for English language learners and students with disabilities.

On a related issue, many schools had cut or eliminated recess. “Kids had been sitting for 3 or 3.5 hours with no break. It was counter-productive,” she said. So the Santa Fe school board passed a policy calling for two recesses plus a lunch recess.

Garcia said she has good working relationship with the union. “All of us would like to see less testing”, she said.