In St. Paul, It Started with Community Conversations

Based on interviews with Nick Faber, President of St. Paul Federation of Teachers, and SPFT Steward Julie Harrington, and the SPTF report, Power of Community.

St. Paul’s test reform victories started with community conversations about the schools St. Paul children deserve. These conversations developed into a shared vision of what school should be and a broad campaign in which less testing was one part of a range of key educational priorities. The union used an open contract bargaining process for their 2013-15 contract to demand reductions in student testing, as well as smaller class sizes, culturally relevant education and professional development. More recently, teachers pushed back on excessive literacy testing in the elementary grades and got the district to eliminate a time-consuming and despised benchmark literacy test. In spring 2017, they produced a powerful video featuring St. Paul students describing the damage caused by over-testing. The video is being used to build an opt-out movement and has also become an inspiring model for other communities.

How did it come about, step by step?

St. Paul’s ongoing campaign for less testing dates back to 2012, when the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers’ then-President Mary Catherine Ricker invited the St. Paul community to describe what kind of teacher contract should be the basis for the kinds of schools they wanted to see. A series of facilitated group discussions of books by Barnett Berry and Alfie Kohn were held to draw out community ideas and proposals that could be included in contract negotiations. These were supplemented by listening sessions and online surveys of SPFT members and parents.

The guiding questions were about the schools and teachers St. Paul children deserve and the profession that St. Paul teachers deserve. The process and the answers to these guiding questions were used to produce a document, The Schools St. Paul Students Deserve. It describes a core set of values, including a whole child education, family engagement, small classes, teaching not testing, culturally relevant education, quality professional development, and access to pre-school.

SPTF brought these goals to the 2013-15 contract negotiations, which were open to the entire community. As a result of the groundwork done in the community to develop a broad vision of St. Paul public education, the union put forward proposals traditionally considered to be the province of management, such as smaller class sizes, less testing, and hiring more librarians, nurses and counselor.

The district initially rejected the proposals. The SPFT then went door to door to explain their vision, building a huge well of community support and gathering 6000 signatures on a petition. During this campaign, the SPFT worked with the St. Paul chapter of the NAACP. To get their message out, they produced weekly videos and in January 2014 held a school walk-in with parents to demonstrate the breadth of their support. After the executive board authorized a strike, parents didn’t turn on the union but instead increased their level of engagement and support.
While the teachers understood, from talking to parents, that parents shared teachers’ concerns about over-testing, the district sent out a message meant to discourage parent support for the union, saying that a strike could delay state testing. That only strengthened community support for the contract demands. Finally, the district agreed to negotiate all of the proposals, making a strike unnecessary.

SPFT created what they call their TIGER (Teaching and Inquiring about Greed, Equity and Racism) team, a combination of teachers, union members, and parents from the community. The focus is on learning about and addressing greed and inequity, not just in the schools but also the negative impact of wealthy corporations on funding priorities. (The TIGER team played a role in pushing the testing committee to create the student video.)

The contract was ratified in February 2014. It included a commitment to a 25% reduction in learning time lost to testing and test preparation by the 2015-16 school year. There was also a district commitment to form a joint labor management team, to review assessments for cultural relevance and to work with the union to lobby state and federal officials to reduce mandated testing.

The district claimed a 26% reduction in time spent on testing and test preparation, based on their testing audit, but teachers have questioned the accuracy of that figure, saying they are not seeing such a large decrease.

Teachers also won elimination of MONDO benchmark literacy testing for elementary students, which they said was extremely time-consuming and not helpful. (MONDO is being replaced with another less time-consuming assessment that provides more useful feedback.) That was a “huge, huge victory for us as well,” said Julie Harrington.

Next on the agenda was building a strong opt-out movement, but most parents were not familiar with opting out. Many had heard rumors about dire consequences for their schools. So SPFT started educating staff and parents, building by building. SPFT members knew, from listening to teachers, how stressful testing is for students, especially for recent immigrants and English
language learners. When teachers raised the idea of opting out at parents’ nights, they had trouble engaging parents. But when parents heard students talking about it, they said “how can we opt out?”

A big success was engaging the ELL population in the testing issue. SPFT brought translators out to advocacy groups and explained to those who don’t speak English as their first language what opting out is and why their kids should do it. As a result, an ELL magnet school got large opt out numbers.

In part because of conversations at a high school for recent immigrants, SPFT decided to videotape students and use their testimony to inform parents. It was a challenging process with many roadblocks but one that resulted in a powerful and compelling video that has been shared and used as a model for other cities.

**What are the remaining problems/issues?**

The unions says there remains an ongoing need to educate the community about the consequences of testing. Among its next steps, they will use the student testing video and PowerPoint presentations at trainings with parent and community support groups and advocacy groups.

There are inequities in how principals have interpreted and applied the district’s decision to reduce the time spent on district-mandated testing. In lower income, Title 1 buildings, some principals are saying they should test students even more. Principals in whiter, more affluent buildings were already finding ways to let teachers teach more, test less. Some principals are still using tests that are not mandated, with some purchasing them out of their local budgets.

There also has been some confusion about what the contract says, with some administrators thinking it had banned MAP testing. Some really liked the MAP testing, which was online and easy for them to use. They felt it gave them quick feedback that could help drive instruction. But they were getting the message from the district you can’t use MAP because of the contract. SPFT explained that it had called for 25% reduction in testing, which would look different in different schools, and drafted a letter clarifying that the contract never said schools couldn’t use MAP testing.

**Advice for other unions?**

- Involve parents and the community early on. The conversation must be around what they want in their schools, not what they don’t want. Start a dialogue about what parents want their schools to look like and then point out how testing gets in the way of that.
- Transparency and an open process are critical.
- Start early and marshal the resources that are required to build a sustainable movement.
- Be bold and think outside the box of traditional contract demands.
- Prepare for pushback, internal and external.