

Test Reform Victories Surge in 2017: What's Behind the Winning Strategies?

Executive Summary

Widespread opposition to the overuse and misuse of standardized testing is producing a marked shift in attitudes about high-stakes assessments and, increasingly, state and district practices. Across the nation, assessment reform activists are winning important victories in reducing the amount of testing and ending high-stakes exams. Of particular note: The number of states with mandated graduation tests has been slashed by half in recent years. The district victories often occur in communities with large percentages of African American or Latino students and low-income families. There has also been progress in implementing better forms of assessment.

These wins often result from effective grassroots advocacy by parents, teachers, students and their allies based on [growing public understanding](#) of the damage caused by the overuse and misuse of standardized testing. The drumbeat of concerns include:

- the amount of testing;
- the time it consumes;
- the outsized consequences for students, teachers and schools attached to test scores;
- the negative impacts on educational equity for low-income and minority students; and
- the damage to teaching, learning and children's futures from the testing fixation.

These factors combine to pressure legislatures, school boards and education departments to reduce tests and lower stakes.

The past year's gains build on previous victories, described in prior FairTest reports (available at <http://www.fairtest.org/k-12/high%20stakes>). They show an increasing capacity to use testing issues to influence elections and to pressure school boards and legislatures to make needed reforms.

The recent gains have occurred within the context of federal testing mandates of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). [Changes in accountability requirements](#) under ESSA, which states can adopt along with use of non-test factors in state accountability systems, provide opportunities for further progress.

This report summarizes recent victories that eliminated tests such as graduation exams, reduced testing time, and promoted better forms of assessments. Through state and district case studies, it also details how activists won these changes.

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Test resistance wins include:

- ***Cutting the amount of state or district testing or the time spent on testing.*** Maryland is a recent example. Its legislature capped the amount of time districts can devote to testing. Instead of testing all kindergarteners, Maryland will test representative samples. Many districts have followed this initiative by ending or reducing their own testing requirements.
- ***Eliminating high school graduation exams.*** Since 2012, the number of states that had or planned to have standardized high school exit exams has [plunged from 25 to 13](#). Idaho eliminated its grad tests in 2017. At least seven states have made their roll back of graduation testing retroactive.
- ***Opting out.*** Idaho and North Dakota brought to 10 the number of states that allow opting out. The opt-out movement in New York held steady at a nearly 20% refusal rate, while increases were noted in other locales.
- ***Implementing performance assessment.*** New Hampshire remains the strongest example of a state overhaul. Half of all school districts are now replacing standardized tests in most grades with local, teacher-made performance assessments. Across the nation, many districts that have cut their own test mandates are joining with local unions to promote such [assessments at the local level](#).
- ***Ending or reducing the use of student test scores to judge teachers.*** Seven dropped this requirement, while other states reduced the weight of test scores.

This report includes case studies that delve into the details of how activists won the changes. The examples include Maryland and seven districts: San Diego, Sacramento, St. Paul, Santa Fe, Las Cruces, Knox County, TN, and Jefferson County (Louisville), KY. Most of these districts include large numbers of African American and Latino students; all have large percentages of low-income children. Test defenders often claim that more testing is good for these students – but educators, parents and the students themselves disagree and have fought hard to diminish the role of standardized tests in their schools.

There are key lessons for other test reform activists from these state and local struggles. These include the strategic use of surveys; building alliances between teachers, parents, students and community groups; winning school board elections; persuading or



Chicopee, Mass., students rally to support their teachers and schools. Photo Credit: MassLive

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replacing superintendents; and careful framing of messages to win clearly defined goals through a thought-through but flexible strategy.

Finally, the 2017 Victories report includes the text of a survey developed by FairTest with the National Council of Urban Education Associations. It can be used by unions with their members and adapted for use with parents and others. It is [available online and downloadable](#).

- For the full version of this 2017 Victories Report go to <http://www.fairtest.org/fairtest-report-test-reform-victories-surge-in-2017>