

## II. Overall lessons from state and local victories

Our investigation revealed a number of common themes, strategies and tactics used by educator, parent and student groups to achieve their wins. In addition to talking to activists around the country and reviewing news and other reports, FairTest asked local and state union leaders who led winning campaigns to identify key lessons for unions as well as parent, student, community and other organizations. In addition, we investigated why states dropped high school graduation exams, which forms the second part of this section.

1. **Educate, organize and mobilize the members.** Tactics have included organizing school-based and union-wide meetings, public forums and rallies (with students and parents); making local videos, showing films, and using social media; and including testing reforms in contract negotiations.
2. **Use surveys.** Surveys help activists determine the reform campaign's primary goals and demands, mobilize people, and provide evidence for the demands to the public and policymakers. Some groups also have persuaded districts or states to conduct audits of the amount of testing. Surveys can build on and at times will correct the audits. (FairTest and the National Council of Urban Education Associations [NCUEA] have developed [a free, downloadable survey](#); see the Appendix to this report.)
3. **Reach out to parents and build alliances with other organizations, such as civil rights groups.** Teachers who are also public school parents or are members of other groups can help with outreach to potential allies.
4. **Line up, win over or replace school committees and the superintendent.** The latter make the decisions about district-mandated testing. In some cases, a series of elections over time were needed to gain a majority on the school board, which in turn led to replacing the superintendent as well as reducing testing. In others, the existing board or administration agreed to make cuts.
5. **Take advantage of existing opportunities for input.** Look for openings to include less testing in contract negotiations or to participate in a district-wide strategic planning process.
6. **Frame the message clearly.** Go positive (e.g., “more learning, less testing”). Focus on the benefits for students. Identify students to voice the issues, in person or on videotape. Parents also can be highly effective.



Students Rally

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7. ***Determine the goal(s) and demand(s).*** In some districts, the goal was to end all district-mandated testing; in others it was to reduce testing. In states it has been to end tests not required by the federal government, such as in the early grades, or stop the misuse of test results, such as for grade promotion, graduation or teacher evaluation. In some districts, there has been a push toward higher quality teacher-controlled or performance-based assessment.
8. ***Develop a strategy for winning.*** In every victory, the union or other leading organization(s) planned a campaign. They had to be flexible to adapt to changing circumstances. Different groups engaged in various actions, but each calculated where to go and how to get there.
9. ***Build the opt-out movement.*** Some local unions have promoted opting out, often in collaboration with parent-led groups. In some districts, the opt out movement helped win the victory. Opting out gets people engaged and committed, and brings great visibility to the issue, but is also difficult to organize and often faces strong district and state resistance.

### **Graduation test lessons**

In less than a decade, [the number of states with high school graduation tests has declined from 26 to 13](#). Nearly half the states that ended these tests made the new policy retroactive, awarding diplomas to tens of thousands of young people.

FairTest looked at states that recently dropped their exit exams and found common themes:

***First, research mattered.*** [Multiple studies show high school exit exams do not increase college going or workforce success, but they do increase the dropout rate](#). Those without a high school diploma have higher unemployment rates, earn far less, have less stable families, and greater rates of incarceration. The tests have blocked graduation for tens of thousands of young people who had completed all their other high school requirements. Many more dropped out because they thought they would not pass the test.

In Arizona, the State Board of Education found that “The tests did not improve college preparedness or workforce readiness,” according to Vince Yanez, former executive director of the board.

***Second, introducing new tests is a good time to reconsider the exit requirement.*** Yanez explained:

Arizona was in transition from the AIMS test to a Common Core test, which initially was the PARCC. ... With the new test, our choice was to have high expectations, or to lower the expectations to ensure enough kids could pass it. It looked like the PARCC failure rate would be high. We wanted high expectations. The Board submitted legislation to end the graduation requirement and it became

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law. ... Arizona subsequently dropped PARCC and contracted with AIR for a new state test.

In sum, the key issue was moving to a tougher test and the consequences of using that for graduation, coupled with evidence the AIMS graduation test had produced no benefits.

Similarly, California imposed a moratorium on graduation requirements as the new SBAC test was implemented. Previous legislative efforts to end the tests had been opposed by then-Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who blocked legislation pushed by student, parent, teacher and civil rights groups. Tens of thousands of students had been denied a



diploma because of the test; many more dropped out because they thought they would not pass. Current Governor Jerry Brown and Superintendent Tom Torlakson backed ending the test. Democratic party unity in support of the moratorium eased passage. Both teachers unions backed the measure, but there was no public campaign, perhaps because none was needed.

This year, a bill that permanently ends the graduation test passed both houses of the legislature and was signed by Governor Jerry Brown.

***Third, public campaigns can matter.*** [The Providence Student Union led a highly visible and ultimately successful campaign to prevent implementation of Rhode Island's newly mandated graduation exam.](#) This campaign changed the views of state leaders, who approved a three-year moratorium. The head of the state education department, who had pushed for the mandate, later extended the moratorium another three years. In 2017, the state permanently ended the exam.

In Pennsylvania, school boards and the teachers union have actively opposed a state graduation test requirement, resulting in a series of delays. This year, the legislature exempted some students from the requirement. Many observers believe the legislature will end the policy before it takes effect.

The Washington Education Association and parent groups have pushed, year after year, to end the state's exit exam. They came close in 2017, but won only a delay of the science test. They will keep fighting.

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In New Jersey, a public campaign to end the exit exam stalled in the legislature, in part due to pressure from Governor Chris Christie. The New Jersey Education Association, Save Our Schools NJ, the Education Law Center and other groups have pressed hard on the issue. The newly-elected governor, Phil Murphy, has promised to end the requirement.

***Making the decision retroactive was mainly a legislative decision.*** Yanez commented, “Some non-grads were asking, or could ask, can I go back to school, then simply graduate because I completed all non-test requirements?” In Arizona, an amendment to the original bill made it retroactive. It was also a question of fairness: Why should previous non-graduates be penalized for a state policy that has been reversed?

***Opposition can be turned into support.*** In Arizona, business groups raised concerns. Yanez said, “But when they saw evidence of lack of benefits of the grad test and our intent to make new test more rigorous, they did not oppose ending the graduation requirement. There was no real opposition to the board-proposed bill.” However, in other states, business groups have been vociferous in their opposition.