

FairTest

National Center for Fair & Open Testing

The Spring 2013 Testing Reform Uprising

The spring of 2013 saw a marked upsurge in resistance to high-stakes testing by students, parents and teachers. The actions most notably included boycotts and “opting out” of testing, but also demonstrations, other public events such as a “zombie march” and a “play in,” public forums, petitions, extensive social media, news conferences, meetings with officials, and a strong legislative push in some locales. Activists garnered community support and often-sympathetic media coverage. As a result, they built a larger, stronger, movement and won some significant victories.

To better understand who was engaged in these actions, their goals, strategies, obstacles and successes, FairTest interviewed 11 activists in 8 locales where efforts to overhaul testing were particularly prominent.

What happened, what worked

Students, parents and teachers engaged in boycotts, “opt-out” campaigns, and walkouts in Seattle, Portland, OR, Denver, Chicago and New York, with smaller events in other communities across the nation. Seattle teachers in several schools boycotted one test; most students, backed by their parents, did not take it when administrators gave it. Families boycotted at 40 schools in New York City and many outside the City. These direct actions generally attracted significant media attention. The goals varied across the groups, from a desire to roll back the amount of standardized testing and end high stakes, to stopping or reducing specific exams, such as for graduation. In other instances, goals were less defined or included non-testing issues. Some groups established long-term and interim goals, with the latter aimed at both useful victories and building capacity for further changes. For many groups, the most important outcome this year was enhanced capacity. Interviewees regularly talked about how much more community awareness they see, how many more people are involved in the effort.

Providence students staged a “zombie march,” then organized a group of prominent adults to take the state graduation test, a majority of whom failed the math. Another effective action was a “play in” at Chicago Public Schools offices protesting the dozen or more standardized tests given to Kindergarten, first and second grade students. Demonstrations and rallies in New York, New Jersey, Texas, Chicago and elsewhere also garnered significant attention.

Public forums often served to educate and involve parents, students, teachers and community members. As a Denver student said, “[T]he strategy is conversations.” Chicago parents took petitions to their schools to inform others and develop contacts. Groups developed allies, including union, parent, community and civil rights organizations. Students, in particular, have started talking across cities, and Denver and Portland students walked out in concert.

Legislative efforts took center stage in Texas, where parents led a successful charge to reduce high school end-of-course graduation tests from 15 to 5. In Minnesota, teachers unions and civil rights groups backed legislation that repealed the state’s graduation exams. Bills were introduced in other

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states as a first step. Other concrete gains included a modest roll-back of testing in the early grades and high school in Chicago and of some Seattle tests.

Many campaigns started in previous years. A few Seattle teachers boycotted in 2012, and there was a sizeable boycott of 'trial' tests in New York. Texas activists had rolled back grade three promotion testing in 2009, while the "mothers against drunk testing" started work more than a year ago.

In other cases, a strong focus on testing first emerged this year. Chicago youth linked testing to discipline issues they had previously campaigned on and to school closings. Providence students opposed a looming graduation requirement that would deny diplomas to as many as 40% of seniors. Portland youth had been working together on issues such as school closings. Denver students came together, quickly planned a walkout, and worked to earn community backing.

What's Next

Strong and creative actions – such as boycotts, walkouts and the zombie walk -- energize participants. They have effectively attracted the media and framed issues well.

Many supporters cannot boycott, for multiple reasons, or cannot make a demonstration on a work day, but are willing to participate. Groups need to develop useful activities that bridge opting out on one end and signing petitions on the other, steps that can involve significant numbers of people, and be forceful and visible.

The media always wants 'new news,' so doing the same thing on the same scale has diminishing returns. On the other hand, groups need to use a wide range of activities to inform, educate, and shape the debate, not just rely on mainstream media.

Threats of reprisals are a real danger to boycotters. For example, some New York City administrators decided to retain opting out children due to absence of test scores. Denver officials threatened suspensions and barring students from walking at graduation. However, pushback against punishments is frequently successful. Anticipating such attacks and planning how to resist them and even turn them to advantage is important. Seattle teachers' refusal to administer tests, plus their wide community support, led officials to drop threats and eliminate some testing.

The perceived race or class composition of the movement is another issue. Urban, activist student groups are quite multiracial. However, in some places parents' boycotting or opting out is seen as mainly 'white' or privileged. In other communities, activists say it is the privileged who are less likely to act together with others. To win, this movement must find ways to bridge these social gulfs.

Students in Providence, Portland and Denver demanded improved assessment as well as an end to high-stakes testing, as did teachers in Seattle and parents in New York and Chicago. In Texas, a proposal by a network of districts to create a new assessment and accountability system (influenced by FairTest and the NY Performance Standards Consortium) passed the legislature only to be vetoed. Assessment can be a valuable educational tool, and schools should be responsible to their communities. Successful strategies often will require a state or district to shift from current practices to educationally beneficial ones.

The fundamental question is how to develop the power to win major testing reforms. Groups across the nation are grappling creatively with the issue as they develop strategic plans for the coming year and more. Facing the wealth and power of government, big corporations, foundations and media, only large numbers of organized people seem capable of turning the testing tide. Sharing experiences, analyses, strategies and tactics, as well as providing support, will strengthen our emerging movement.