

New Mexico students join others in nation against new tests

March 2 2015, by Russell Contreras

New assessment tests that have angered parents and teachers across the nation prompted walkouts Monday by hundreds of high school students in New Mexico who had been set to take the exams.

The backlash came as millions of U.S. students started taking the rigorous tests aligned with Common Core standards that outline math and language skills that should be mastered in each grade.

New Mexico is among a dozen states debuting the tests this year.

Opponents say the exams distract from real learning, put added stress on students and staff members, and waste resources, especially in poor districts.

Parents and students in Colorado, Pennsylvania and New York have already opted out of the exams. Others are lobbying lawmakers and education officials for change.

In Florida last week, Gov. Rick Scott suspended spring testing for 11th graders.

In New Mexico, a few hundred students at Albuquerque High School joined the walkout despite warnings from administrators that they could face discipline. About 100 other students at nearby Highland High School also left class as testing began.

Students at both schools took to the sidewalks with signs and chanted as supporters honked their horns.

The test—called the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC—can also be used in teacher evaluations and school grades.

Maya Quinones, 18, an Albuquerque High School senior, said administrators warned her that participating in the walkout might prevent her from taking part in graduation ceremonies.

"If we make something happen, if next year comes around and the PARCC test is gone, then I feel like we're successful," said Quinones, an organizer of the protest. "And you know what? As long as I get my diploma, I'm all right. I don't have to walk in line."

Julie Guevara, 16, said students believe the testing is taking away from their overall education.

"We hope the governor hears us and does something about this," Guevara said. "We're not going away and plan to do this again until the testing is done."

Gov. Susana Martinez's office said annual assessments are required by the federal government and this particular test was designed by teachers and educators to address concerns about previous "fill-in-the-bubble" tests.

"Students from all over the country are transitioning to a different exam this year," Martinez spokesman Enrique Knell said. "We aren't alone, and this transition has been occurring for many years."

Things went fairly smoothly for the thousands of New Mexico students

who did take the test, although some computer glitches were reported, state officials said.

The walkouts and demonstrations in New Mexico began last week in Santa Fe then continued in Carlsbad on Friday.

Students from several Las Cruces schools joined the movement Monday by walking out of classes. Some carried signs that read "More teaching, less testing," and "Out the door with Common Core."

The Santa Fe walkouts sparked students at Highland High School to stage their own protest, 16-year-old Highland student Connor Guiney said.

"It's an excess of time being used and an unfair evaluation of teachers," Guiney said. "We don't appreciate that and we wanted to make a stand."

New Mexico Education Secretary Hanna Skandera said the exams would provide useful results.

"PARCC also takes the necessary step of raising expectations," she wrote in an Albuquerque Journal opinion piece published Sunday.

Skandera said the test isn't an additional exam, just a better version of the state standards exam it replaced.

Some opponents would prefer an exam that samples random students to offer a snapshot without such high stakes attached. Others support rating schools through an accreditation process such as ones used by colleges and universities. Accreditation includes site visits, in-depth analysis and a detailed action plan.

Pennsylvania saw 1,064 students statewide opt out of required math tests

last year, a tiny percentage of the 803,000 exams given but a nearly fivefold increase from the number who opted out in 2011, according to that state's Education Department.

In New York, around 5 percent of students—roughly 67,000—sat out the statewide math test taken by 1.1 million of their peers last year.

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