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BRING BACK MY TEACHER: Joseph Ramirez, 10, protests the removal of his fourth grade teacher, Amy Asaoka-Nakakihara. Asaoka-Nakakihara was transferred out of the school over disagreements with administration over her teaching methods.

BRUCE CHAMBERS, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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Teaching dispute leads to parent picketing and student walkout

Reassigned fourth-grade teacher says she has history of student success, but doesn't conform to district guidelines.

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The Orange County Register

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ANAHEIM – Parents upset with the transfer of a fourth-grade teacher involved in a dispute with administrators over her teaching style took their students out of class and picketed in front of Sunkist Elementary School on Wednesday.

They are upset that teacher Amy Asaoka-Nakakihara was transferred out of her fourth-grade class in the middle of the school year. They are demanding that the school district allow her to return to class.

"She is such a passionate teacher and we see the improvements in our children. We just want her back," said parent Gina Nuñez, who marched in front of Sunkist with her son, Joseph.

In all, 11 of the 30 children stayed out of class to protest. Parents said they would return their children to class Thursday.

The debate at Sunkist highlights a larger issue about increasing pressure on educators to boost student test scores. The result, many teachers say, is a frustrating lack of freedom in how they are allowed to teach, even when their individual styles have proven successful.

District officials would not comment specifically on the clash, saying it's a private personnel matter.

"Generally speaking, though, it is important to us that our teachers follow the guidelines set by the district," said Suzi Brown, spokeswoman for the Anaheim City School District.

Asaoka-Nakakihara, a 14-year veteran at the school, said she first asked for a transfer in October when it became clear her style of teaching no longer meshed with guidelines enforced by the principal.

The teacher acknowledged that she does not follow all of the district's textbooks or follow a daily lesson plan meant to ensure students meet federal No Child Left Behind standards.

But, she says, her history shows that her students do make above-average progress toward meeting state and federal standards.

Nuñez said her son Daniel was in Asaoka-Nakakihara's class last year and his math and language arts scores improved dramatically.

Other parents said that while they'd hoped for gains of 15 to 20 points on standardized tests, in many cases they saw their children gain 100 points and more. Those parents say they can't understand why Asaoka-Nakakihara was asked to alter her teaching style when her students were already improving.

Asaoka-Nakakihara announced to her class on Dec. 14 that she was being transferred to a different school. But within days, she had a change of heart and asked to finish out the school year at Sunkist. She said she was overwhelmed by the outpouring of support from students and parents.

District officials asked the teacher to clear out her classroom Dec. 21 and report to a special teaching assignment at Key Elementary when classes resume there on Monday.

Classes at Sunkist resumed after the winter break at 8:30 a.m. Wednesday. A vice principal took over her class and will continue to teach through the end of the school year in June.

About 15 parents and students marched in front of the school with signs reading, "We want Miss A. back," and "She takes learning to the next level of excellence."

District officials said the transfer will move forward and they do not expect Asaoka-Nakakihara to return to Sunkist.

"The vice principal who is taking over the classroom knows the children, so we are hoping it is a smooth transition," Brown said.

Mid-year transfers are not uncommon, Brown added, citing 42 teacher transfers within the district this school year.

Parents said they will continue to protest until their children's teacher returns. Asaoka-Nakakihara said there's nothing she wants more than to return.

"I have a lot of respect for my district and for Sunkist. It's my home," she said. "I don't like all the