

## **Innovative Educational Assessments that Support Deeper Learning**

**Are there better ways of assessing student knowledge and skills other than state and federally mandated standardized tests?**

Yes, there are.

### **Performance Based Assessments**

Performance-based assessments tell us what students have learned by having them actively demonstrate their knowledge and skills by doing. The road test for driving, or an audition for a part in a musical are common examples of this type of assessment. They ask students to complete a task or project requiring them to apply knowledge and explain process and methodology in solving a problem, explaining a phenomenon, answering a question or hypothesis, conducting an inquiry, or creating an original work. Performance-based assessments are designed to be authentic to student learning and experience and are connected to actual curriculum implemented in the school and classroom. They allow students to demonstrate mastery of learning standards in ways that reward critical analysis, varied modes of expression, depth of knowledge, and student voice and choice. When implemented effectively, assessments are evaluated and graded so as to give the student meaningful feedback towards continuous skill improvement. Well-designed rubrics can be a way of accomplishing this end. Ideally these assessments are developed by teachers, individually and in grade-level and discipline-specific committees in consultation with school administrators and members of local communities. Accountability comes from the school community, as student work should be available for demonstration and community inspection. This is very much in the Massachusetts tradition of local school committees and districts being responsible for meeting the needs and expectations of their communities.

**Can performance based assessments be scaled?**

Yes, they can!

### **Examples of Scaled Systems of Performance Based Assessments**

Successful systems of performance-based assessments contain infrastructure and networks of practice and oversight to support the school-based work. Banks of performance tasks and project possibilities, development of common rubrics, professional development to exchange ideas and practices, inter-rater reliability studies, and partnership with research academics to study practices and outcomes, are all important elements of improvement in practice and adequate scaling so that a local performance-based assessment system can be incorporated into a mechanism for accountability.

Several states have allowed for and supported performance-based assessment in varying degrees of scale. Whether or not the system of performance-based assessments rises to the level of a state accountability system, making room for and supporting such assessments that develop deeper learning and critical thinking skills in students is good educational policy.

Performance-based assessment, because it is authentic to student experience, is a culturally responsive framework that respects teacher practice as opposed to off-the-shelf standardized testing.

### Massachusetts--MCIEA

The Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment (MCIEA) is a partnership of eight MA public school districts and their local teachers, joined together to create a fair and effective accountability system that offers a more dynamic picture of student learning and school quality than a single standardized test. <https://www.mciea.org>. MCIEA's accountability system focuses on a School Quality Measures framework that includes multiple measures of student engagement, student achievement, and school environment, and emphasizes Performance Assessments as the primary means of assessing student learning. MCIEA is a partnership of public-school districts and their local teacher unions from Attleboro, Boston, Lowell, Milford, Revere, Somerville, Wareham and Winchester. MCIEA partners with the Center for Collaborative Education and UMass Lowell. Approximately 1 in 10 students in Massachusetts is enrolled in an MCIEA school.

To assess student learning, educators design standards-based, culturally responsive performance assessments, and submit them to a MCIEA Performance Assessment Task Bank for peer review and approval. Teachers administer these tasks for students to demonstrate what they know and can do in ways that are authentic, culturally responsive, and engaging. If this performance assessment model were adopted statewide, teachers across schools and districts would be regularly brought together to engage in blind scoring of student work to ensure scoring reliability. High school graduation decisions would be made at the local level, using in part portfolios of student work. The state's role would be to provide districts with resource support, technical assistance, and perhaps certain basic criteria and guidance. State assessments would be used for **diagnostic** purposes to provide a consistent data source on student learning to schools and educators, without the requirement of passing state tests to graduate high school.

### New York

#### The New York Performance Standards Consortium

The oldest and most demonstrably successful system of performance-based assessment in the country is the New York Performance Standards Consortium (NYPSC). <https://www.performanceassessment.org> In 1996, the New York State Education Department granted a group of schools a variance from the Regents graduation testing requirements, inviting them to use inquiry-based models of teaching and learning and develop a system of assessments that were performance-based in lieu of standardized tests. A Blue Ribbon Commission was established to evaluate the work. The Commission recognized the NYPSC schools' accomplishments and recommended the variance continue. The work of the NYPSC was also subject to evaluation by an appointed Performance Assessment Review Board composed of university researchers and experts in the field. Data reports document the impressive graduation

and college acceptance rates of NYPSC students.<sup>1</sup> The NYPSC is now in its 25<sup>th</sup> year, with the Regents exam variance having been renewed every five years since 2001.

There are 38 schools in the NYPSC serving over 12,000 students. The NYPSC's system is based on in-depth literacy, mathematical problem-solving, application of the scientific method, social studies research, a span of mediums for exhibiting learning, and a chance for students to have a voice and proud ownership of their work. The schools' literacy-based culture focuses on extensive reading, writing, and discussion across content areas in every grade, building towards the graduation-level performance-based assessment tasks, known as PBATs. All Consortium students prepare PBAT papers and oral presentations including analytic essays on literature, social studies research papers, lab reports of original science experiments or engineering designs, narratives of the process and solution of mathematical problem solving and added tasks at the individual school level in the arts, art criticism, World Language, internship, or other areas. Graduation-level PBATs are evaluated by external assessors using [Consortium rubrics](#) for both writing and oral presentations. In addition, a series of [interim assessments](#), roundtables, [classroom argumentation](#) based on content and evidence, creative and first-person writing, and hands-on projects all prepare students for their final PBATs.

The success of the performance-assessment model has been documented through the CUNY pilot study of NYPSC graduates.<sup>2</sup> Quantitative evidence demonstrates that students in Consortium schools begin high school more educationally and economically disadvantaged than their peers and yet are more likely to graduate from high school, attend college, and persist in college than demographically similar peers. Those who go on to attend CUNY are more likely to be Black and Hispanic and are more likely to be from the Bronx (the borough with the lowest per capita income) than their CUNY peers. Early evidence suggests that Black males in particular benefit from a Consortium education when compared to Black males educated in traditional high school settings. They are noticeably more likely to persist in college and to receive higher grades. The results also indicate positive outcomes for students admitted to CUNY through the Consortium–CUNY pilot: on average, they achieve higher first-semester college GPAs, earn more initial credits, and persist in college after the first year at higher rates than peers from other New York City schools, who, on average, have higher SAT scores.

### The PLAN Pilot

New York received a grant in 2022 from the Department of Education to help replicate and scale effective performance-based assessments across the state. The grant application cited three models: the NYPSC, the International Baccalaureate (which is a project and inquiry-based learning model) and a career and technical workforce readiness demonstration of skills and knowledge. The Pilot seeks to reimagine New York's assessment strategy so that it purposely fosters high-quality instructional opportunities, provides authentic measures of deeper learning, and better prepares students for college and the workplace.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> "A Performance Assessment Model: Data Report on the New York Performance Assessment Consortium" (2001) <https://www.performanceassessment.org/howitworks>

<sup>2</sup>Michelle Fine and Karyna Pryomka, "Assessing College Readiness Through Authentic Student Work" (2021) <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/assessing-college-readiness-authentic-student-work-report>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nysed.gov/plan-pilot>

## Colorado

The Colorado Department of Education offices of Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness and Assessment engaged Colorado practitioners and leaders from K-12 education, industry, and higher education to create a process and supports to the field in the development of performance assessments that students can use to demonstrate their readiness to graduate from high school. It defines high quality performance assessments that are generally hands-on and/or involve real-world scenarios and have the capacity to measure a student's ability to apply and transfer to new situations both relevant content knowledge and essential skills.<sup>4</sup> Colorado also developed a local innovative assessment grant program with participation from 32 districts. Several districts have developed or are currently working to develop performance-based assessment graduation requirements. For example, the Canon City requires all graduates to complete a Capstone project showcasing math, language arts and essential skills through a portfolio and oral presentation to a panel composed of district/school staff and community members.<sup>5</sup>

## Kentucky

Kentucky has undertaken a statewide “United We Learn” initiative that seeks to create a system of local systems transforming assessments into those that foster and support deeper learning.<sup>6</sup> Kentucky received a federal assessment grant from the Department of Education in 2022 to help undertake this work. Kentucky’s public schools are increasingly shifting their focus to more practical learning experiences, engaging students in deeper lesson plans that build off prior knowledge and help students apply what they learn to real-world challenges.<sup>7</sup> Through this project Kentucky launched its L3 initiative—Local Laboratories of Learning—to institute assessments and other practices that support deeper learning. There are three cohorts of districts that began operating in 2021 and 2022 to create innovative assessment and accountability systems that seek to develop and measure skills and knowledge beyond standardized testing and are all in some way performance based.<sup>8</sup> While because of federal law Kentucky cannot stop all standardized testing for ESSA purposes, it has undertaken a statewide initiative of stakeholder partnerships to shift how students are assessed and thus how they learn to reflect the ideas of deeper learning and continuous improvement rather than test, reward and punish. Kentucky provides an innovative statewide model for a non-standardized test-based system of assessment.

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/perfassessment>. A multi-site case study of performance assessment practices was undertaken by professors at the University of Colorado, Boulder School of Education. Elena Diaz-Bilello and Medjy Pierre-Louis, “The Colorado Performance Based Assessment Pilot: Background and Context” (October 2021), <https://www.cde.state.co.us/postsecondary/pacasestudypaper1>

<sup>5</sup> <https://sites.google.com/canoncityschools.org/cchscapstonecurriculum/home?pli=1>

<sup>6</sup> <https://education.ky.gov/UnitedWeLearn/Pages/default.aspx>

<sup>7</sup>

<https://www.kentuckyteacher.org/news/2022/11/kentucky-superintendents-hear-update-on-deeper-learning-initiative/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://education.ky.gov/school/innov/Pages/Current-Projects-and-Initiatives.aspx>;  
<https://www.leadingwithlearning.org/kentucky>

## New Hampshire

New Hampshire received an Innovative Assessment grant from the federal Department of Education in 2015 to undertake a statewide system of performance-based assessment. The Performance of Competency Education (PACE) system relied upon locally developed, locally administered performance assessment tasks aligned with local district grade and course competencies. These local competencies and local performance assessments were aligned to the State Model Competencies, which, in turn, were aligned with national standards in each content area. The PACE common tasks and local tasks are intended to be closely linked to classroom instruction. All the tasks, local and common, are teacher-designed to assess the specific competency targeted by lessons within the curriculum or unit of instruction. The tasks are not administered in a specific testing window, but instead come at the time during the year when it is most appropriate in the curriculum. Students write and revise, perform real-world applications of mathematics, or conduct science experiments to demonstrate their competencies. Assessments are so integrated into the curriculum; students often do not realize they are taking a test. Instead, they consider the PACE tasks to be another part of their daily classwork.

Through local development and cross district cooperation, professional development and task bank creation, the New Hampshire Department of Education was on its way to developing a comprehensive system. Preliminary independent evaluations of the PACE system indicated positive results for students and teachers.<sup>9</sup> A change in political leadership of the state led to New Hampshire abandoning the statewide system, although many local districts continue to implement the innovations and have formed their own consortium – the New Hampshire Performance Learning and Assessment Consortium for Educators – to continue practices and develop assessments.<sup>10</sup>

## New Mexico

In response to graduation and testing data, the needs of its diverse communities, and the call for better methods of ensuring that graduates are prepared for college, the workforce and citizenship, in 2019 New Mexico conducted an overhaul of its graduation requirements and assessment system.<sup>11</sup> Policymakers in New Mexico recognized that the one-size-fits-all, single-state-test accountability system had not served New Mexico's diverse population well over the last 20 years, and the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) opened doors for flexibility in assessment that New Mexico had not yet utilized to build a comprehensive system of assessment. New Mexico eliminated its high stakes graduation exams and replaced them with a flexible system of proof of competencies. New Mexico is encouraging locally developed performance-based assessments through rigorous portfolio projects and is also developing a statewide option culminating in student exhibitions to demonstrate learning. The statewide

---

<sup>9</sup> HumRRO, Formative Evaluation of New Hampshire's Performance of Competency Education (PACE), Final Report, March 2017, <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/guid/stateletters/nhpaceformativeevalrpt2017.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <https://nhlearninginitiative.libguides.com/c.php?g=1231117&p=9009437>

<sup>11</sup> See Future Focus Education, "Remodeling Our Systems of Assessment in New Mexico: Current Conditions and Opportunities," October 2018  
[https://futurefocusededucation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/FFE\\_White-Paper\\_fulldraft\\_print.pdf](https://futurefocusededucation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/FFE_White-Paper_fulldraft_print.pdf)

option will be connected to communities of practice throughout the state.<sup>12</sup> As a result a variety of successful graduation level performance assessment local practices have sprung up across the state.<sup>13</sup> Policymakers in New Mexico recognized that the one-size-fits-all, single-state-test accountability system had not served New Mexico's diverse population well over the last 20 years, and the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) opened doors for flexibility in assessment that New Mexico had not yet utilized to build a comprehensive system of assessment. New Mexico eliminated its high stakes graduation exams and replaced them with a flexible system of proof of competencies. New Mexico is encouraging locally developed performance-based assessments through rigorous portfolio projects and is also developing a statewide option culminating in student exhibitions to demonstrate learning. The statewide option will be connected to communities of practice throughout the state.<sup>15</sup> As a result a variety of successful graduation level performance assessment local practices have sprung up across the state.<sup>16</sup>

### **Are Performance Based Assessments Valid and Reliable Instruments?**

Yes, they are!

When put into system-wide practice, performance-based assessments have been found to produce superior educational and equitable outcomes to standardized tests. Through communities of practice, development of rubrics, inter-rater reliability studies, and independent auditing, performance-based assessments can provide the validity and reliability as measurements of learning that ensures accountability for what occurs in school practice. It does so without the harm of standardized tests. Schools and districts in states as varied as New York, Massachusetts, New Mexico, New Hampshire and Kentucky have come to this conclusion, verified by independent research.

---

12

<https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Cohort-2024-Demonstration-of-Competency-Menu-Options-rev-8.26.2021.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <https://futurefocusededucation.org/innovation-map/>

<sup>14</sup> See Future Focus Education, "Remodeling Our Systems of Assessment in New Mexico: Current Conditions and Opportunities," October 2018

[https://futurefocusededucation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/FFE\\_White-Paper\\_fulldraft\\_print.pdf](https://futurefocusededucation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/FFE_White-Paper_fulldraft_print.pdf)

15

<https://webnew.ped.state.nm.us/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Cohort-2024-Demonstration-of-Competency-Menu-Options-rev-8.26.2021.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> <https://futurefocusededucation.org/innovation-map/>