

Research

The promise of performance assessment

Show What You Know

U.S. students are over-tested but under-assessed, charges Douglas Reeves, director of the Denver-based Center for Performance Assessment. Standardized tests provide data on large groups of students, such as how all fourth-graders fared on state reading tests, but the scores from these tests fail to capture the true measure of an individual student's learning.

That's why Reeves urges schools to adopt performance assessments as an essential component of curriculum and instruction.

But what exactly is performance assessment? The Chicago Public Schools offers a clear definition on its instructional intranet: "Unlike a multiple-choice or true-false test in which a student is asked to choose one of the responses provided, a performance assessment requires a student to perform a task or generate his or her own response. For example, a performance assessment in writing would require a student to actu-

ally write something, rather than simply answering some multiple-choice questions on grammar or punctuation."

Teachers seldom use standardized test scores to improve classroom teaching and learning, Reeves says, but those who use performance assessments throughout each curriculum unit can gauge students' progress and are more likely to raise student achievement. That can't happen unless teachers know where each student stands in terms of progress—exemplary, proficient, progressing, or not meeting standards—and uses that information to decide whether to reteach lessons, try different instructional strategies, or give students extra time and more guided practice to learn and learn well.

By Susan Black

Teacher exemplars

In a November 2002 newsletter, Reeves describes two teachers who use performance assessments this way. Every day Patrick Rock, a math-science teacher at Elkhart Elementary School in Aurora, Colo., records his students' accomplishments, problems, and levels of understanding on individual index cards. Rock relies on this information to plan the next day's instruction, form small student groups, and focus on district and state standards. His system, he says, helps students "get more involved and enjoy their work more."

Lorrie McCartney, an art teacher at Lake Forest High School in Felton, Del., gives her students scoring guides that describe performance standards in both art history and writing. (Lake Forest High has adopted a "writing across the curriculum" program that requires students to write in all subjects.) Recently McCartney's students used the scoring guides when they wrote essays describing art styles in the time of Michelangelo. Giving



students the performance standards up front, instead of keeping them a secret until the final test, paid off in two ways, McCartney says: Students communicated their ideas accurately and effectively, and they took their writing assignment seriously.

These teachers used performance assessments to improve student learning, a principle that's at the core of the National Forum on Assessment's position on assessment reform. Performance assessments get to the heart of teaching and learning when they're integrated into daily curriculum and instruction, says Monty Neill, executive director of the Massachusetts-based National Center for Fair and Open Testing (FairTest) and former cochair of the National Forum. And teachers who create a "continuous flow" of performance assessments throughout their teaching, he says, are more likely to adjust the pace of their lessons, correct students' misconceptions, and help students reach broad and deep understanding of curriculum topics.

What research says

In a 1997 study commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education, project officer Michael Kane and his research team examined the basic assumptions underlying assessment reform—that performance assessments will result in better teaching and learning and will raise student achievement. Performance assessments include two components, according to the researchers: First, students actively construct their own demonstrations of important curriculum topics, and second, teachers and students use scoring or evaluation systems to monitor progress toward high-level learning.

The researchers identified five types of assessment tasks:

- On-demand assignments that require students to respond in a short period of time, such as working with a small group to brainstorm a solution to a problem.
- Extended assignments that give students out-of-class time to research a topic and figure out how to show their understanding of new information.
- Demonstrations that allow students to present or exhibit and explain their

work on a curriculum topic.

- Portfolios that collect and organize students' performance tasks—such as essays, drawings, and reports—and show their learning progress.

- Other tasks that students can choose to show their level of mastery of new concepts.

The researchers also described four methods teachers use most often to gauge students' performances: (1) rubrics that describe general skills and competencies; (2) rubrics that describe specific skills and competencies; (3) teachers' classroom observations that are the basis for analyzing teaching and learning, planning lessons, and diagnosing students' needs; and (4) checklists that contain the criteria and components students need to know in order to strive for high achievement.

The study revealed that school leaders who cast "wide pedagogical nets" as they worked on assessment reform—by involving teachers and students in planning and developing performance assessments on an ongoing basis—were more likely to achieve the main purpose of improving instruction.

In addition, the researchers found that assessment reform was more successful when it was "moderately prescribed" rather than "tightly prescribed." That is, teaching and learning improved when school administrators were patient and relatively nonprescriptive and gave teachers ample time to experiment with performance assessments. In schools where officials issued top-down mandates for assessment reform, on the other hand, teachers tended to be resentful and un-

Principles of performance assessment

BEFORE DRAFTING performance assessments for your school, be sure teachers, principals, and others involved in the process agree on several basic principles. The Center for Performance Assessment offers the following guidelines for designing performance assessments that will help students learn:

- *Assessments are part of the curriculum.* Think of assessments as support and reinforcement tools teachers can use to help students reach proficiency—not as a replacement for tests.

- *Assessments are known to everyone involved.* Share assessments and scoring guides with students and parents, and make expectations for learning clear at the beginning of new curriculum units.

- *Teachers use multiple assessments.* Use more than one measure to determine students' learning and achievement. Multiple tasks and scoring guides encourage teachers to give feedback to students as they build skills, acquire knowledge, and arrive at understanding.

- *Students have multiple opportunities to achieve proficiency.* Give stu-

dents several opportunities to assess their own knowledge and understanding and to demonstrate mastery of important curriculum concepts. Ideally, every student should achieve proficiency. If some do not, they should be encouraged to revise, redo, and resubmit their performances. Those who reach proficiency should be given enrichment opportunities and encouraged to strive for mastery on related topics.

- *Students have many ways to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding.* Provide students with sample criteria for each level of performance, and encourage them to propose their own unique, creative, and acceptable ways of showing proficiency.

- *Students are expected to "show what they know."* Hold students accountable for doing more than simply completing a project or performance. Hold them accountable for demonstrating their knowledge and understanding, in considerable depth and breadth, of essential curriculum concepts, but don't over-reward those who do clever or neat projects.

Adapted from Center for Performance Assessment, www.makingstandardswork.com.

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cooperative, and teaching and learning did not improve.

Finding the time

If performance assessments hold so much potential, why don't more teachers use them? Many cite an overcrowded curriculum. "Look at my curriculum notebooks," a beleaguered middle school science teacher said to me when we met in her classroom. "This month I'm covering two big topics—the digestive system and the respiratory system. I don't see how I can cover everything and have time

for my students to do demonstration projects and performances."

Reeves acknowledges the time crunch most teachers face, but he cites a number of Advanced Placement teachers he's worked with who are responsible for what he calls "a formidable curriculum" but who refuse to turn their unit studies into a race to the finish. These teachers, he says, have learned how to determine which standards and topics deserve high priority. And they've learned to organize teaching and learning around these "power standards."

Many teachers simply "teach, test, and hope for the best," write Jay McTighe, director of the Maryland Assessment Consortium, and Grant Wiggins, director of the New Jersey-based Center on Learning, Assessment, and School Structure, in *Understanding by Design*. Such "surface coverage" defeats the aims of having students learn and understand essential curriculum concepts in depth and breadth, they write.

McTighe and Wiggins recommend that teachers design instructional units by following these three steps:

1. *Identify results.* What should stu-

dents know, understand, and be able to do? Which curriculum topics and goals deserve priority and are worthy of understanding? At the end of the unit, what are the enduring understandings students should remember?

2. *Determine acceptable evidence.* How will you know if students have achieved the desired results and met the standards? What will you accept as evidence of students' understanding and proficiency?

3. *Plan learning experiences and instruction.* Which activities will help students learn? How should you teach so students will gain necessary knowledge and skills? How can you help students demonstrate their deep understanding of important and enduring theories, concepts, and ideas?

When students truly understand, McTighe and Wiggins say, they're able to perform in the following ways:

1. *Explain:* Provide thorough, supported, and justifiable accounts of facts and data.
2. *Interpret:* Tell meaningful stories,

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Seven steps toward performance assessment

WHAT SHOULD you know as you develop performance assessment systems for students? The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement bases the following recommendations on a study of 16 school districts that have experimented with performance assessments:

1. Clearly define the primary purpose of the student assessment system.
2. Design a performance system that includes a mix of different tasks and scoring procedures.
3. Communicate the theory and purpose of performance assessment to school board officers, administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community residents.
4. Involve teachers in the design and implementation of the new assessment system. Give them adequate time

and training to know and understand the purpose and methods of performance assessment.

5. Prescribe new assessment systems loosely so teachers can innovate, experiment, and design methods that work in their classrooms.

6. Coordinate assessment reform with other school improvement plans, especially in the areas of curriculum and instruction.

7. Grant waivers from testing and reporting requirements to schools that are designing and adopting innovative assessment practices.

Adapted from Kane, Michael, et al. "Assessment of Student Performance: Studies of Education Reform." Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, April 1997; www.ed.gov/pubs/SER/ASP.

School Law

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Wardlaw's majority opinion about the EAA. But she dissented from the majority's free speech conclusions. In Berzon's view, the analysis of student/staff time under the EAA should also hold true under the Free Speech Clause. That is, the Free Speech Clause should not be interpreted to give students the right to engage in religious activity at times during the school day when student attendance is mandatory.

As for World Changers' use of school supplies, audiovisual equipment, and school vehicles, Berzon wrote that the Establishment Clause prohibits the expenditure of public funds for religious activities. The judge acknowledged that in recent years the Supreme Court has ruled that public funds may be used to pay secular expenses of private religious schools (see *Mitchell v. Helms* in 2000), and that religious clubs at public universities have a right to use money raised from student fees (see *Rosenberger v. Rector and Visitors of University of Virginia* in 1995).

However, Berzon explained that Wardlaw's opinion goes beyond the scope of those rulings and gives religious clubs the right to use public money to fund religious activities—a violation that goes to the very heart of the Establishment Clause.

Simple theory, difficult case

Although the EAA is simple enough in theory, this case shows how complicated it can be when it's applied to actual cases—especially when the Free Speech Clause enters the picture.

Although Congress enacted the EAA to protect what it considered to be the free speech rights of students, I believe that Judge Wardlaw is right in concluding that the students' rights under the Free Speech Clause in regard to religious clubs might be broader than their EAA rights. And I agree with Wardlaw's application of the Free Speech Clause to student/staff time. Even though student attendance is mandatory during that period, a student's participation in a World Changers meet-

ing during that time would be entirely voluntary.

But I agree with Judge Berzon's dissent about the right of World Changers to use school supplies, audiovisual equipment, and school vehicles. While the Free Speech Clause certainly gives religious clubs the right to meet on school grounds under the same terms and conditions as other noncurriculum-related clubs, I believe that free speech rights end, and Establishment Clause prohibitions begin, when it comes to spending public money to pay for religious activity. That's regardless of whether that activity comes in the classic form of church worship or in the more modern form of student evangelical activities in a high school.

The EAA itself wisely honors that line by prohibiting the use of public funds—other than for incidental expenses—for groups covered by the statute. That's one issue on which I believe the EAA, the Free Speech Clause, and the Establishment Clause are in complete harmony.

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offer accurate translations, and add personal images, anecdotes, analogies, and models to their new learning.

3. *Apply*: Effectively use and adapt new knowledge to different contexts.

4. *Think openly*: Have a broad perspective that takes in the big picture rather than a narrow viewpoint.

5. *Empathize*: Find value in what others believe and be sensitive to others' ideas.

6. *Self-assess*: Develop self-knowledge that includes introspection about one's own style, prejudices, beliefs, and habits of mind.

Much of the work that goes into adopting performance assessments falls to teachers. But school leaders and other policy makers have an essential role in ensuring the success of assessment reforms. Neill calls for school leaders to pro-

vide a "foundation of high-quality schooling" that includes an understanding of how students learn, clearly defined learning goals and standards for all students, high-quality teachers, adequate learning resources, and dedication to helping all students learn at high levels. Just as important is providing time and money for ongoing teacher training in curriculum development, instructional improvement, and assessments.

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