Quality Performance Assessment: Harnessing the Power of Teacher and Student Learning

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Since the fall of 2008, the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE) has partnered with the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF) to explore the potential power of performance assessments to transform student learning and teacher practice. Through the Quality Performance Assessment Initiative (QPA), we have collaborated with a diverse group of 20 schools to strengthen and document local assessment systems and to implement common performance assessments across schools. The schools include urban, rural, and suburban schools, and represent charter, Pilot, and regular district school types in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island.

For this study, QPA has developed the following definition of performance assessment:

Quality Performance Assessments are multi-step assignments with clear criteria, expectations, and processes that measure how well a student transfers knowledge and applies complex skills to create or refine an original product.

Quality Performance Assessments: Harnessing the Power of Teacher and Student Learning, and the accompanying QPA Guide for schools, describe specific actions and strategies for schools as they undertake the challenge of developing a performance assessment system. The stories from the field share the experiences and entry points of three participating schools.

The Need for Quality Performance Assessments

The purpose of any assessment is to provide meaningful information about what a learner knows and can do. The fact that 40 percent of first year college students need to take at least one remedial course upon enrollment (Conley, 2011) demonstrates a large gap between public school assessment of college readiness and higher education measures of actual readiness.

Current standardized tests do not do a good job of assessing the complex, multi-step intellectual tasks that are at the heart of the 21st century skills every student needs. All students should have the opportunity to engage in meaningful work that matters and prepares them for the 21st century. Teacher-designed performance assessments that are integrally linked to curriculum and instruction have the potential to provide the kind of feedback crucial to improving student learning and achievement.

ENGAGING IN MEANINGFUL WORK ALIGNED TO THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS

Seniors at Fenway High School in Boston, Massachusetts, are expected to write and present a position paper that demonstrates their ability to think deeply about a subject and to write meaningfully. The Senior Position Paper is aligned with the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts as well as with the Fenway Habits of Mind—perspective, evidence, connection, relevance, and supposition. To graduate, seniors must present and defend an idea, write persuasively, use appropriate voice, conduct relevant research, use appropriate citations, and revise their work. Common rubrics support this work and shape teacher practice and student expectations at each grade level by fostering common understanding. Grade-level expectations are further solidified through the creation of anchor papers used by teachers and students.

A Framework for Quality Performance Assessment Systems

The Quality Performance Assessment Framework provides guidance to practitioners on how to design a local performance assessment system. The following key elements guide the work:

- **Aligned instruction**—To gain knowledge and skills, all students need instruction based on college and career readiness standards that are accessible to their learning strengths and needs.
- **Task design**—Valid assessment tasks include determining appropriate levels of content and cognitive complexity, setting clear criteria for success, and ensuring accessibility for all students.
- **Data Analysis**—By examining student work and score data, practitioners infer important information for planning future instruction and assessment.
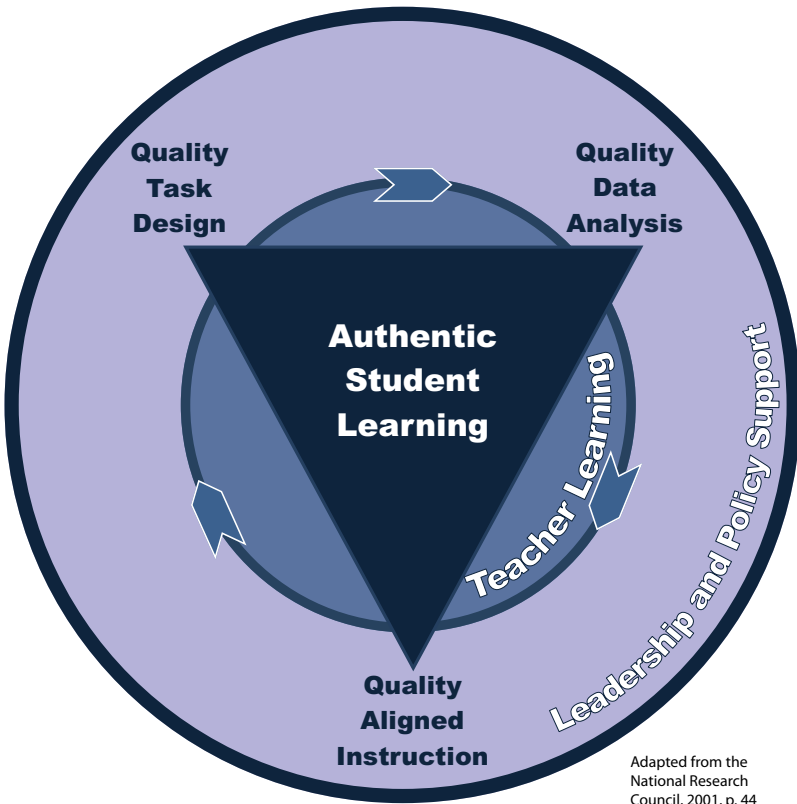
The graphic to the right illustrates how these components form a cycle of technical quality with authentic student learning at the center.

Adapted from the National Research Council, 2001, p. 44

QPA defines authentic student learning as learning that is meaningful to students in which complex skills are embedded and transferable to new situations. Such learning can be assessed in multiple modes. Learning is most authentic when it provides opportunities for ownership and decision making in real world situations.

In the QPA framework, the standard for proficiency is clear to students, and feedback is provided to help improve instruction and student performance.

Essentials for Success

In undertaking the important work of designing and implementing a new assessment system, three Essentials must be in place to ensure success: technical quality, professional communities of practice, and leadership and community support.

TECHNICAL QUALITY. Quality performance assessments must have technical quality. Assessments must be valid, reliable, and sufficient. *Valid* means an assessment measures what it is designed to measure (both content and intended level of rigor). *Reliable* means a group of teachers (or scorers) can agree on what a rating means and score it the same way. *Sufficient* means students have been given a complete opportunity to demonstrate mastery and enough evidence of learning has been collected. Without technical quality, there is no guarantee that an assessment system has evaluated student learning fairly and completely. When there is technical quality, teachers are able to assess whether or not they are teaching what is being assessed, and can adjust their instruction accordingly.

ALIGNING TO 21ST CENTURY SKILLS

In the Pentucket Regional School District (Massachusetts) teachers prepare students for life beyond secondary school by teaching and assessing key Habits of Learning (HOL). The HOL include thinking and reflection, communication, collaboration, independence, and creative exploration. They are an integral part of the Pentucket local assessment policy. In order to develop a common understanding of what teachers are expected to teach and students are expected to learn, Pentucket provides all teachers and students with detailed descriptions of the Habits of Learning. The district policy requires that HOL be taught explicitly and assessed throughout the school year from pre-kindergarten through high school. The Habits of Learning represent important local standards that are integral to graduation requirements, and are meaningful indicators of student performance across grade and subject levels.

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PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE.
Implementing an effective performance assessment system requires a cultural shift as well as a deepening of professional knowledge and skills. Teachers need to learn to use new tools to develop and implement performance assessments. Practitioners will also need to score work together so they can internalize common expectations and score with consistency. Discussions of expectations, student potential, the role of effort in performance, and of teacher practices that need to change must be ongoing. This work takes time and trust in order to encourage teachers to share teacher and student work.

CREATING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Pentucket Assistant Superintendent Dr. William Hart designed sessions in which middle school teachers came to the high school to share examples of HOL assessments they had developed. One participant noted, "This time [was] invaluable to share ideas, motivate teachers to improve their practice, and allow teachers time to continue to explore the use of performance assessments and how the HOL rubrics can work to improve our classroom instruction and outcomes."

LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT. Successful efforts to adopt high quality performance assessments have been driven by a high level of support from teachers, parents, community members, and school and district officials. The more all stakeholders participate in building the foundation of the performance assessment system, the more school leaders will be able to draw upon this base of support in the future. The field stories of Fenway and Pentucket demonstrate that this work can be explicitly linked to college and career ready outcomes so that it is viewed as a worthy investment of student time and energy as well as parental support.

Key Lessons in Moving Forward with Quality Performance Assessment

In the 21st century, students will not be evaluated on their ability to complete multiple-choice exams or memorize facts, but rather on their ability to think critically and creatively, communicate clearly, conduct authentic research using new media, and write persuasively and passionately.

These skills call for the next generation of assessment—high quality performance assessments that measure how well a student transfers knowledge and applies complex skills in demonstrations of learning.

As a country, we need to shift away from an education system in which students graduate based on "seat time" and course completion towards one based on graduation through demonstration of mastery of standards and building expertise in each content discipline. If teachers collectively learn to design and implement performance assessments with technical quality, the policy door will be opened to teacher-designed performance assessments that count. Teacher-led assessment systems are the most effective way to ensure that our students will learn the skills outlined by the Common Core State Standards through curriculum alignment, authentic student learning, and meaningful assessments.

Some districts may be tempted to utilize commercially-developed performance assessments, cutting short the time and resources needed for professional development. This decision would be a profound mistake.

Teachers should participate in the process of designing and using high quality performance assessments from the beginning.

They should be given the support and professional training necessary to develop assessment literacy in order to conduct assessment with technical quality. Without such central teacher involvement and professionalism, it is unlikely the next generation of assessments will promote desired levels of student achievement and authentic learning.

We hope to contribute to a conversation that leads to increased use of performance assessments and increased ownership of assessment practice at the local level, with the goal that students learn what matters most.

Cape Cod Lighthouse Charter School—Assessment Critique Sessions

Cape Cod Lighthouse Charter School chose to focus on technical quality as part of its performance assessment work. The faculty wanted to ensure that the assessment tasks they developed were valid—producing intended information about student learning. As a faculty, they explored a key question: Is the assessment task designed to provide valid information about mastery of standards/content?

Working with professional development support from CCE, Cape Cod Lighthouse teachers used a structure for critical review to share and critique assessment tasks. Several teachers prepared and presented an assessment they wished to review in light of its validity. The assessments covered a range of projects, from an independent reading project to a foreign language to a social studies museum artifact project. In preparation for the critique session, teachers gathered all documents related to the assessments, including prompts, standards maps, rubrics, and instructional materials to share with their colleagues. In addition, they selected samples of proficient student work to serve as evidence of students' ability to demonstrate mastery of the selected standards on the assessment.

A cross-disciplinary group of four to five teachers, the review team, analyzed all of the submitted documents, following a detailed sequence of critique, and assessed whether the assessment met the following criteria: there was clarity and focus; student engagement was encouraged; assessment was fair and unbiased; principles of Universal Design for Learning were adhered to; and accommodations for students with IEPs/504 plans were allowed. Once the review steps were completed, the team determined whether or not the assessment task met the criteria. If necessary, teachers met with the team to make a plan for revision.

This kind of rigorous peer critique is rare in public schools, yet it has considerable power to transform practice. As one participant noted in an evaluation, "Looking at assessments with a critical eye was extremely beneficial and will not only help me become a better teacher, but certainly enhance my students' learning and improve their depth of knowledge." As teachers and leaders gain fluency with performance assessments, they also build their school or district's capacity to develop and implement professional development activities that facilitate the development of strong local assessment systems.

(Assessment Critique adapted from Hess, 2009)

1. Determine graduation and promotion requirements, essential learnings, and/or habits of mind and work that focus the school on the most important standards for students. Analyze course syllabi and assessments for alignment to prioritized standards.

2. Determine whether all students have learning opportunities and access to a rich and rigorous curriculum by aligning school structures and curriculum.

3. Ensure that the content and complexity of each assessment is appropriate for the assessment grade level, based on the school's established content sequence and grade level standards.

4. Engage teachers in the design of performance tasks using clear criteria, agreed upon expectations, and processes that measure complex skills in multiple modalities. The tasks should be transferable to new situations and meaningful to students. These tasks should focus on authentic (real world) learning whenever possible; they should engage students, and provide opportunities for ownership and decision making in real world situations.

5. Provide a sample of student work at each performance level illustrating work at that level for each assessment.

6. Evaluate the use of universal design principles for each assessment (e.g., language clarity, use of white space and graphics) to ensure that all assessments are usable and effective, and that students have full access to the assessment.

7. Determine whether outcomes on assessments and the interpretations made about learning are closely related to student outcomes on other measures of the same standards.

8. Collect evidence to document consistency in scoring and calculate a reliability score for each assessment.

9. Document and adopt the local assessment policy through a process that builds the political will and support of all stakeholders.

10. Design professional development in communities of practice that supports all teachers in effectively implementing the policy.