



Testing For Real World Success Online Summit Takeaways

Evaluating Students Through Group Work, Projects, and Portfolios

Is there a better way than standardized tests to find out what students are learning? A small number of states, districts, and educators have long sought to find an answer to that question. Problem- and project-based learning, cooperative learning, portfolios, senior projects, and competence-based learning—to name a few—are all versions of this ongoing movement to evaluate students on what they can do with what they know rather than their test-taking skills. But evaluating student learning this way can be highly subjective:

- How can teachers and administrators assess students' performance in fair, constructive ways?
- What are the biggest challenges to implementing performance-based learning and how are schools getting around them?
- How do you know students are acquiring the deeper learning that projects were intended to cultivate?

On Tuesday, Feb. 19, 2019, *Education Week* reporters and their guests took a big-picture look at the current state of performance assessment and pinpoints some best practices with you, the readers.

Below you'll find key takeaways we've distilled from the online summit discussions.

You can also review the entire special report upon which this summit was based on:
www.edweek.org/go/PerformanceAssessment



On-the-Ground Perspective on Performance Assessment

Intro: *Education Week's* curriculum reporter **Stephen Sawchuk** led a discussion of how one district incorporated a yearlong performance assessment into its graduation requirement—and some of the opportunities and challenges it faced.

His guests included:

Young Whan Choi, Manager of Performance Assessments, Oakland Unified School District, Oakland, Calif., and

Scott Marion, President and Executive Director, Center for Assessment

- This discussion leaned heavily on the topic of rubrics for grading student projects. Oakland has three standards/rubrics they use:
 - Writing;
 - Field Research;
 - Oral Presentation.
- Most readers were on board with rubrics but were concerned about how they fit within a traditional grading scheme. Rubrics give rich descriptions of performance, but parents are used to As and Bs. It can be hard to translate between the two types of grading.
- In high school, California has standards for science, math, and English/language arts for high school. Capstone projects should support the learning goals articulated in those standards.
- Capstone projects and assessments don't appear to be common. Sixteen or 17 states encourage these, but few states require them. This means that some districts take them seriously and others don't.
- Oakland's approach was built from the ground up, with teachers buying in and the district supplying professional development as more teachers began experimenting with scoring rubrics.



Making Group Projects Fair for Everyone

Intro: Collaboration is among employers' most consistently sought-after skills, but simply putting students in group projects does little to help them develop those skills. **Assistant Editor Sarah D. Sparks** explores practical wisdom and research on how to develop and evaluate meatier projects that teach students content and collaboration.

Her guests included:

Art Graesser, Professor, Department of Psychology and the Institute for Intelligent Systems, University of Memphis; and

Rachel Scott, Magnet Director, Texarkana Arkansas School District, Ark.

- **Is there a better way to develop and deploy group project initiatives?** More schools are experimenting with rubrics, performance assessments, and rubrics that focus on specific collaboration skills. Schools are also looking for ways to compose groups to emphasize diverse backgrounds and perspectives, such as by:
 - Providing linguistic and other supports for students with limited English proficiency.
 - Teaching students how to engage with teammates in live and online settings.
 - Encouraging students to think about their group dynamic and prevent individual members from dominating or retreating from the discussion.
- **Teacher challenges when initiating project-based learning initiatives:** Often teachers must teach students these skills before they undertake a project, so the student's expectations are better managed. Teachers often don't provide robust feedback, and consequently, often do not convey to students how to better construct their collaboration between the students in the group, for example, according to Art Graesser. Moreover, teachers often do not know when and how to intervene effectively when fights break out in a group.
- **How can educators assess collaboration skills—independent of content knowledge—in evaluating group projects?** Focus on concrete aspects of teamwork. For example, the Program for International Student Assessment (or PISA) identified a dozen different skills in its recent collaborative problem-solving test, including:
 - Assigning and understanding your own and others' roles in the group;
 - Time management and monitoring
 - Civil and substantive feedback between students, and more.

- **The Intersection Between SEL and PBL:** One of the challenges educators wrote a lot about was student emotions, since most group work happens in middle and high schools. The age of these students provides educators an opportunity to step in and lean in on the students' more social and emotional learning needs, not merely their academic goals. These projects put all these things to the test, so to speak.
- **Group projects are as old as schools themselves.** However, these more thoughtful, intricately-designed projects are gaining ground as schools moved to more problem-based learning in an effort to prepare students for college and career.



Letter Grades: A Help or A Hindrance?

Intro: A growing number of teachers complain that letter grades tend to distract students from real learning and are too heavily based on non-academic factors. But this grading system is notoriously difficult to eradicate, and schools' attempts to substitute alternative grading systems often face backlash. *Education Week* reporter **Madeline Will** and two teachers who have moved away from traditional grading practices discuss the challenges and benefits of alternative systems.

Her guests included:

David Frangiosa, Physics Teacher, Pascack Hills High School, Montvale, N.J.; and **Julia E. Torres**, Language Arts Teacher and Librarian, Denver Public Schools

- **What did people want to know?** A lot of educators were curious about how moving away from traditional grading works and wanted to know how students respond to these changes.
- **Teachers say that:** taking away the "A" (or the grade) makes students think more deeply of how to master the content. Most of our educators and our guests who have experimented with grading say they have seen an increase in student engagement, after some initial roadblocks.

- **Community response.** There can be a lot of community pushback, however. Students and parents are often skeptical of grading changes, because they're used to working to get an A.
 - There can be logistical challenges of implementing grading changes, since school systems are often not set up for experimentation.
 - Parents are confused when teachers get rid of traditional grades. But once you explain it to parents and they start to see positive results, they do tend to get on board.
- Teachers say that when one teacher experiments with grades, then others tend to follow suit after seeing positive results. Educators say it's also important for administrators to be supportive of experimentation and trial-and-error.
- Administrators can support teachers by:
 - Going through the research;
 - Examining what works and what doesn't;
 - Addressing successful strategies for answering parent questions; etc.
- Standards-based grading is more common in the lower grades is what we heard from the educators in today's discussion. However, nationwide, based on Will's reporting, the movement to get rid of grades entirely is fairly small. One barometer she used was that there's only 10,000 educators in the Facebook group devoted to teachers throwing out grades.
- **What does "achieving mastery" look like in this context?** Teachers measure whether students can apply the skills laid out in the course standards on assignments and assessments.



Making Assessment Painless

Intro: Thanks to a new state law, Georgia is trying out game-based assessments for 1st and 2nd graders. These are “formative assessments” to help teachers gauge what students know in math and reading as they are learning, and so far, dozens of districts have signed up to participate. **Assistant Editor Alyson Klein** shares insights from a Georgia educator and an educational games expert on how their experiment with game-based assessments is working out.

Her guests included:

Scot Osterweil, Creative Director, Education Arcade and the Game Lab, MIT Comparative Media Studies Program; and

Allison Timberlake, Deputy Superintendent for Assessment and Accountability, Georgia Department of Education

- **Game Content:** Georgia is experimenting with a game-based, formative assessment for 1st and 2nd graders called “Keenville.” Right now, about half the districts in the state are participating. The state is still working to refine the game and may be holding a focus group to get feedback from educators. Down the line, Georgia may expand game-based assessment to other grades.
- **How many assessments and for whom?** Right now, Georgia only has 10 games for the students to play for the students in grades 1 and 2. It eventually plans to roll out 31.
- **Educator Role:** The state is still working to refine “dashboards” that will help teacher, principals, and even superintendents understand and use the data Keenville provides.
- **Student Response:** The kids seem to be really into in, based on a visit our reporter took to an elementary school outside Atlanta.
- **Student Motivation:** The students rack up points in the game for correct answers – “beans” – and can trade them in for accessories for their avatar, called a ‘Keen.’ They can trade the beans in for sunglasses for the “Keen,” for instance, or use them to purchase decorations for the Keen’s virtual house.
- A lot of educators want practical advice on how this works in Georgia for their educators and how they could get a practice run of Keenville. Georgia is hoping to get a demonstration of the game online eventually.
- **What’s the future of the games?** The state is hoping it will eventually be used to shape teachers’ instruction and potentially replace traditional classroom formative assessments. The state may try a similar approach in other grades.



Performance Assessment and College Admissions

Intro: Do students have a tougher time getting into college if they come from schools that use projects and portfolios as assessments? **Veteran reporter Catherine Gewertz** explores several initiatives that are working with colleges to take a broader view of applicants’ academic achievements.

Her guest: **Peter Ross**, Principal, Education First

- **Challenges.** The discussion outlined some key challenges for colleges and universities that are interested in using performance assessments to help them evaluate students for admission. A big challenge is time: How can admissions-office readers find the time to watch videos, read project reports and examine Power Points when they're already pressed for time reading applications?
- **How to evaluate performance assessments.** Many participants wanted to know how admissions officers could evaluate projects. Ross and Gewertz offered a few resources for websites and organizations that are sharing grading rubrics online.
- **New tools to help bridge the high school-to-college gap.** Ross and Gewertz offered some examples of model school transcripts and profiles that are being developed to help explain performance-based learning to colleges.
- **Real-world examples.** Participants wanted to know which states are using performance assessment instead of standardized tests for accountability. New Hampshire, with its PACE system, emerged as the only state so far, but a few other states are working together to do so. A subset of schools in New York state, also, have had a waiver from state testing requirements so they can use performance-based assessments. Gewertz also outlined the experience of a student from one of those New York schools. As part of a pilot admissions project, she applied to the state's CUNY system and was admitted based on her performance-based projects, even though her SAT scores fell just short of the college's cutoff.

Be sure to review the entire special report.

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