

Feature 6: Authentic Assessment

“Portfolios are much better than tests. We have to know more and be able to explain it. It’s not just a one-time thing. It’s harder, and it really helps us learn.”

—Student from Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School

What Students Need

In addition to rethinking curriculum and pedagogy, redesigned schools take more meaningful approaches to assessment, which begins with clarity about what students should know and be able to do when they graduate and continues with opportunities to develop, refine, and exhibit those skills in authentic ways that reflect how knowledge is used in the world outside of school.

The modern workplace requires students to demonstrate well-developed thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, design strategies, and communication capabilities that cannot be assessed by most currently used multiple-choice tests. Performance assessments—widely used around the world and increasingly sought in the United States—allow students to demonstrate their knowledge more fully by directly exhibiting a skill, reporting on an investigation, producing a product, or performing an activity. By measuring students’ abilities to apply knowledge to solve pertinent problems, such assessments encourage and support more rigorous and relevant teaching and learning. This approach is both essential to deeper learning and motivating for students.

Research shows that students who regularly engage in such assessments do as well on traditional standardized tests and better on tests of analytic and performance ability than other similar students; they are also better prepared for college. Teachers who regularly use and score such assessments also learn more about how their students understand the material and have developed applied skills, as well as about the standards embedded in the assessments. They are better able to teach to the standards and student needs and to design their own inquiry projects and assessments, which deepen learning opportunities.¹⁰⁴

Key Practices

Clear and Meaningful Expectations

Effective schools have clear and meaningful expectations for students that relate to what they need to learn for a healthy and productive life. Over the past 2 decades, an increasing number of schools, districts, and states have adopted what is known as a **Graduate Profile**, which answers the question, “What do we want students to know and be able to do by the time they graduate?”

Graduate Profiles reflect the knowledge and skills students need to be college and career ready in the 21st century and to meet the challenges our society will face in the years to come. These standards often include ambitious academic goals, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, communication skills, skill in new technologies, cultural competence and multilingualism, creativity, emotional intelligence and leadership skills, and growth mindsets. Graduate Profiles provide important guideposts that students, families, and staff can all understand.¹⁰⁵

Once the goal is established, the school's faculty determine on a more detailed level what is essential for their students to know and be able to do, making principled choices about what is most important—that is, what ideas and skills are central to the discipline, are transferable to other contexts, and allow students to gain access to other ideas and skills. This kind of discipline in choosing material to study is necessary when one understands that students learn more from in-depth study of concepts that they evaluate and skills they apply to new situations than from a cursory overview of many topics.

Performance Assessment

Once a school is clear about what students should know and be able to do by the time they graduate, the next question that arises is, “How will we know if we are succeeding?” That question is best answered by looking at **student work** as the concrete representation of progress toward the standards. As a result, student work is the focus of the school: Student writing, artwork, and other projects are displayed prominently throughout the school to demonstrate this commitment to placing their learning at the center of the school's mission. Student work is also the subject of much teacher and student discussion and analysis. Students have frequent opportunities to engage in serious conversations about their work and to share, reflect upon, and receive feedback on their progress. As teachers look at the work of their students, they learn much more about what is working as they had hoped and what is not than they could learn from scores on standardized tests. And as they look at the work of other teachers' students, they have a window into the curriculum and teaching strategies used in other classrooms.

These conversations about the quality of student work best occur in the framework of a well-crafted **performance assessment system** that more fully reflects what students should learn and be able to do.¹⁰⁶ Performance assessment systems are based on common, schoolwide standards; they are integrated into daily classroom practice; and they show students what they will need to do by providing models, demonstrations, and exhibitions of the kind of work that will be expected of them. They are used to foster learning and continuous improvement, not as a way to push out students or set ambitious goals and allow students to fail. Generally these systems include:

- **portfolios** of student work that demonstrate in-depth study through research papers, scientific experiments, mathematical models, literary critiques and analyses, arts performances, and so on;
- **rubrics** that embody the set of standards against which students' products and performance are judged;
- **oral presentations** (exhibitions) by students to a committee of teachers, peers, and others in the school to test for in-depth understanding and assess the student's readiness for graduation; and
- **opportunities for students to revise** their work and improve in order to demonstrate their learning and meet the standards.

Students develop their portfolios over time with the support of their teachers. Class assignments are designed to meet the portfolio requirements and are judged using the same rubrics. Students revise and improve the work they have done in class, often during advisory time and with the help of their advisor or other classroom teacher, to prepare it for inclusion in the portfolio. Many high schools not only have

a graduation portfolio that students prepare in their last 2 years but also 9th- and 10th-grade portfolios or projects that focus instruction and help students learn how the process of developing and exhibiting complex projects works.

Beyond statements of expectations, effective schools provide common frameworks for how students can achieve them. This may take the form of **common “habits”** that describe and help students acquire the cognitive and social-emotional abilities they need to do well in school. (See [Feature 2: Safe, Inclusive School Climate](#).) These habits may require students to weigh and use evidence, address multiple perspectives, make connections among ideas, evaluate alternatives, and assess the value of the ideas they have studied, as well as to present their ideas clearly and effectively. These habits, which are an essential part of a deeper learning curriculum, are consistently reinforced across classrooms through the use of common assessment rubrics. Whether a student is working on a literary analysis paper or a mathematical proof, their teacher is assessing their work with similar questions, such as: “Did you provide evidence? Did you consider alternative perspectives or approaches? Did you adhere to the conventions of the discipline?”

When students graduate, they leave with a portfolio that they carry proudly, because it represents the work they have done over multiple years; it represents who they are, what they care about, and what they have learned; and it means much more than a test score. Portfolios are not just evaluation instruments; they are complex learning experiences as well as opportunities to reflect on the learning journey.¹⁰⁷ Students in schools that use portfolios consistently report that the portfolios help them learn more. One New York City high school student explained: “You get to do most of the thinking when you work with your portfolio. You have to explain in detail how to do something or why something is important, so that someone who doesn’t know it can understand it.” Another student said: “When you take a test, you don’t feel like you need to know it after it is done. The portfolio sticks in your brain better.”¹⁰⁸

In Practice: Senior Defense Thesis

A row of desks is lined up facing the front of a classroom, where a projector is queued up. The desks are occupied by a judging panel, among them the school librarian and two other educators from a high school in Pasadena Unified School District in California. The panelists wrap up their discussion of the student presentation they have just observed, and then the school librarian steps outside to call in the next student, Maria, who is ready and waiting in the hallway.

Maria enters the classroom dressed professionally and stands poised in front of the panelists. She is here to present her senior defense, a culminating event of her high school education as a Pasadena Unified student. Her professionalism signals how seriously she takes the experience. Maria pulls up her PowerPoint with support from the librarian and waits at the front of the room for a cue from her judging panel that they are ready for her to begin her presentation.

She begins by introducing herself and sharing her educational journey. Maria is currently a 12th-grader who has been a student in Pasadena Unified since 6th grade. When she moved to Dallas from Peru at age 5 and skipped kindergarten, she did not speak English. She reflects that it was only once she moved to Pasadena Unified that “[her] life started.” She credits this to her involvement in the Puente program—an extracurricular program designed to support the college

readiness of first-generation Latino/a students—and the mentorship of two particular teachers at her high school. “Yes, they are teachers to me,” she reflects. “But they are also my mentors—my father figures. They’ve seen me laugh; they’ve seen me cry.”

After introducing herself, Maria presents her first artifact—a research paper she wrote on the topic of “designer babies,” a genetic concept that touches on both science and ethics. As she presents, she reflects on both the content and process of her research, noting that the assignment taught her how to “search deeper” in her thinking. Throughout her presentation, she maintains strong eye contact with the panelists, gestures to help communicate her points, and displays a strong understanding of her research topic.

Next, Maria presents her second and third artifacts—a reflection on her experiences volunteering at a local Ronald McDonald House with a group of her peers and an original dance she choreographed with a group of her peers for a school basketball game. Throughout her reflections, she shares how these artifacts helped her cultivate the district’s graduation competencies of collaboration and creativity and develop the leadership that has allowed her to take greater ownership for projects in her academic coursework. To conclude her presentation, Maria shares her plans for the future: to stay involved in her community and study psychology at a 4-year college to learn “why people talk and think the way they do.” She shares:

All of this, and my artifacts, show that I am ready to graduate. ... I’ve gone through those struggles and learned how to conquer them. I can take them into college. College is not an easy path. [My high school] has taught me how to not give up.

Source: Adams, J., & Kaul, M. (2020). *Using performance assessments to support student learning in Pasadena Unified School District*. Learning Policy Institute.

School Supports

The data gathered through an effective performance assessment system help teachers hold themselves accountable and improve their practices. As one New York City teacher put it, “Portfolios are a key way into individual work with students, to see what’s working and what’s not, and what we need to do better.”

Student assessment is a learning tool, a tool for guiding progress, not a method for sorting students into successes and failures. At too many schools today, people say, “We know we have high standards because so many students fail to meet them.” This is actually an example of low standards for the educators in those schools. Having high standards for young people means having high standards for adults in their work with young people, as educators work together to create a wider range of strategies to meet student needs. Standards and assessment cannot be separated from curriculum and instruction. Teachers help students achieve by constructing the pathways to success with careful scaffolding and opportunities to iterate.

Student assessment is a learning tool, a tool for guiding progress, not a method for sorting students into successes and failures.

Joint curricular planning among teachers is needed for curriculum and assessment to “add up” to these expectations throughout the school—to build ideas and skills from one course to another and from one year to the next. This enables more powerful learning than can be achieved with a fragmented, disconnected course of study that leaves students with gaps, holes, and misunderstandings as they try to put the pieces together by themselves. Teachers and students alike understand that everyone is heading toward the Graduate Profile. (For more on common planning, see [Feature 7: Well-Prepared and Well-Supported Teachers](#).)

Performance assessment networks can also support school learning. A growing number of high schools—and some districts—have developed their own assessment systems to support deeper learning.¹⁰⁹ The [New York Performance Standards Consortium](#) has supported dozens of high schools in implementing a portfolio assessment system with a waiver from state Regents exams since the 1990s, having demonstrated stronger college performance from students experiencing this form of deeper learning and rigorous assessment.¹¹⁰ These schools share common expectations for project work in each core discipline and use the same rubrics for assessment, and they calibrate scoring within and across schools.

In more recent years, a [California Performance Assessment Collaborative](#) has emerged, serving a wide range of schools across the state, along with districts such as Oakland Unified School District, which requires a capstone project of all seniors; Pasadena Unified School District, which requires a graduation portfolio; and Los Angeles Unified School District, which features graduation portfolios in all of its Linked Learning high schools (about one quarter of all high schools in the district). A study of these systems found that they expanded opportunities for students to demonstrate deeper learning competencies—including improved communication and presentation skills; greater confidence in college and career preparation; and growth in social-emotional skills such as perseverance, creative problem-solving, and a growth mindset. It also found that teachers reported an increased focus on alignment among curriculum, instruction, and assessment across subjects and grade levels; continuous reflection on and improvement of their instructional practices; more positive relationships with their students; and closer collaboration with their colleagues.¹¹¹

Similar collaboratives in New England and [Hawaii](#) join states like [New Hampshire](#), [Oregon](#), and [Washington](#), which have long designed and supported local performance assessments. The College Board has integrated project-based performance tasks in many of its courses—including the [AP Research course](#), the capstone [AP Seminar](#), and the [AP Computer Science course](#)—evaluated as part of the final score, and has announced it will spread the practice to its other courses over the next few years, as evidence shows that students are more successful both in the courses and in college as a result of these experiences.¹¹²

In Practice: Learning Through Revision

At Oceana High School in Pacifica, CA, the school’s performance assessment system is explicitly designed as a learning tool and has helped create a schoolwide culture of revision and redemption (see [Feature 5: Student-Centered Pedagogy](#)). All 12th-graders at Oceana complete a yearlong Senior Exhibition project. The project includes a research paper, which is scored on a rubric that includes a category called “Revisit,” indicating the paper needs to be revised to meet the standard. Teachers offer structured support for the revision process. As one student explained, “With the help of my mentor and humanities teacher, they both told me that this doesn’t mean to stop, but it means to

keep trying. I kept trying and put together a great paper that I feel ‘killed it’ in all aspects.” Although the revisit concept was originally created for the senior research paper, the idea of a revisit (the opportunity to revise and improve work) has now become a cultural norm throughout the school, with most teachers offering students revisits on major assignments. In 2022–23, the school adjusted its schedule to add a “flex time” period (see [Feature 1: Positive Developmental Relationships](#)), which makes it easier for students to see their teachers to work on revisits.

Source: Maier, A. (2016). *Performance assessment profile: Oceana High School*. California Performance Assessment Collaborative & Learning Policy Institute.

Another aspect of using assessment for learning is being thoughtful about how to use data. Teachers and school leaders today have access to huge amounts of data about their students, and in many schools a lot of time is spent in meetings talking about data, with no real impact on student learning. Effective schools are clear about which data they look at and why. Even with a quality performance assessment system, educators can sometimes become overfocused on rubric scores and miss important information that explains *why* students may be struggling. Data can also be used to help teachers understand those factors that support success. They can then incorporate those factors into their teaching.

Educators Shane Safir and Jamila Dugan¹¹³ have introduced a framework that helps educators stay focused on which kind of data to use for which purposes:

- **Satellite data:** Lagging indicators (such as standardized test scores, attendance rates, graduation rates, teacher retention, etc.) can be useful for longer-term strategic planning.
- **Map data:** Formal school- or classroom-based data (such as analysis of student work and scores on performance assessments or other school-level math assessments, information from student or staff surveys, etc.) can be used to understand trends in a more nuanced way.
- **Street data:** Qualitative and experiential data (such as interviews with students, fishbowl discussions or student feedback groups, shadowing a student, structured classroom observations, etc.) tell us what works for students.

It is easy to overfocus on satellite-level data, which can tell educators which students are succeeding and which are not (often revealing opportunity gaps), but which do not provide a solution. Map-level data, especially student work, can provide a better diagnosis of the problem. Yet frequently the path forward to improving student performance is found through careful attention to street-level data, where teachers listen deeply to understand the student experience and then make the necessary adjustments to allow all students to succeed, which is what authentic assessment with supports enables.

Effective schools devote significant time and resources to teacher professional development that is linked to student learning. If performance assessment results indicate that a teaching team is struggling to support their students in a particular area, those teachers carefully analyze student work and then engage in peer observations and other street data collection to understand what is getting in the way of student success. Schools may also engage students themselves in this process, inviting students to observe

teachers and provide feedback. These cycles of inquiry can then lead to a collaborative schoolwide effort in which the faculty develops collective ownership of a pedagogical framework—a set of common practices that is effective in supporting their students to meet high expectations. (See [profile of June Jordan School for Equity](#) in [Feature 7: Well-Prepared and Well-Supported Teachers](#) for an example of such an effort.)

Such schoolwide goal setting and shared public assessment of both students' and teachers' work convey valued ideals in concrete ways. They provide occasions to recognize and celebrate student and teacher work, and they make clear the areas in which more work is needed. The public nature of these processes is an important incentive for teachers not only to prepare individual students well but also to work to improve their overall teaching. When done well, assessment becomes a learning tool for everyone in the school community.

School Profile: Student Portfolios at New York Performance Standards Consortium and Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School



Photo provided by New York Performance Standards Consortium.

The [New York Performance Standards Consortium](#) is a network of 38 schools serving 30,000 students in New York that have agreed to use common performance assessment measures. Even though their students enter with lower academic skills than New York City averages, Consortium schools have significantly higher graduation and college-going rates, especially for Black and Latino/a students, English learners, and students with special needs. Since the 1990s, this evidence has persuaded the state to allow the schools to waive most Regents exams so that they can do this deeper work.

Students at each Consortium school complete four **performance-based assessment tasks** to graduate: a literary analysis paper, a science experiment and lab report, a math problem-solving analysis, and a social studies research paper. (Individual schools also add tasks in the arts, art

criticism, world language, internship, or other areas.) These assessment tasks grow out of classroom work—students typically complete the tasks in every subject-area course throughout high school, improving with practice. Then, before graduation, students present and defend their best work before a committee of staff, fellow students, and outside evaluators. The written work, as well as the oral presentation, is evaluated using common Consortium-wide rubrics, and external assessors validate the results to ensure that expectations are similar across schools.

All the Consortium’s performance-based assessment tasks require “extensive reading, writing, discussion, and critical thinking.” For students to succeed on the tasks, teachers must design challenging, culturally responsive curricula that respond to student interests and questions. To support this process, the Consortium and individual schools offer extensive professional development for teachers. The tasks themselves grow out of the daily work in the classroom and are rooted in the collaborative efforts of students and teachers, creating an authentic feedback loop that results in improved academic outcomes.

The Consortium recently engaged in a research pilot with the City University of New York (CUNY), which agreed to evaluate promising Consortium school students on the basis of their portfolio assessments if they did not meet the CUNY SAT cut score for admission. The initial study found that the students admitted on this basis had higher college GPAs, initial credits, and persistence in college after their first year than peers from other New York City schools who had higher SAT scores on average.

[Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School](#), a small neighborhood school in the South Bronx, is a Consortium member. Located in the poorest congressional district in the United States, this New York City community high school helps students succeed by, among other things, focusing both on deeper learning and on meeting a wide range of students’ needs. The school meets needs through a **community schools model** that offers health care and other services in collaboration with the Children’s Aid Society; an attentive advisory system; and pioneering uses of technology to cultivate both synchronous and asynchronous classrooms that allow students to pursue mastery.

Recently named a School of Opportunity by the National Education Policy Center and a Canopy school of innovation by the Christensen Institute, the school is grounded in a belief that students learn best by investigating authentic issues in ways that require collaboration, personal responsibility, care for others, and a tolerance for uncertainty. These crucial habits of mind and work are nurtured in classrooms where students are engaged in a **curriculum centered on projects they design** and carry out themselves and by work that students undertake outside of traditional classrooms through internship learning. In 2018, 97% of Fannie Lou Hamer’s students applied to and were accepted to college.

The school works to nurture students’ abilities to connect, question, innovate, and communicate. Students investigate personally meaningful problems and are assessed using a performance-based system that ensures rigorous student inquiry. In the 9th and 10th grades, students complete a portfolio of their work from each academic class. In January of their 10th-grade year, with support from their advisor, students revise their portfolios and add a reflection component, and then

present the portfolio to a committee during the Spring Family Conference before they move on to the 11th grade. In 11th and 12th grades, in preparation for graduation, students complete seven “Masteryes”—one each in Literature, History, Math, Science, and Autobiography, plus two subjects of their choice. The school’s website explains that these tasks require significant independent work “with an eye toward college expectations” and “are designed to reflect an in-depth understanding of a particular issue in the context of the overall discipline and incorporation of the Habits of Mind and work.”

Once the classroom teacher has confirmed that a Mastery paper represents a student’s best work and meets the standards of the Consortium rubric, the paper is reviewed by an external evaluator before the student presents and defends it to a panel that includes school staff and external evaluators. Students are eligible for graduation once they have completed all seven Masteryes and successfully completed the panel process in each of the four core content areas, scoring Competent or Higher in all areas on the Consortium rubrics. “Portfolios are much better than tests,” explained one student. “We have to know more and be able to explain it. It’s not just a one-time thing. It’s harder, and it really helps us learn.”

Sources: Fine, M., & Pryiomka, K. (2020). *Assessing college readiness through authentic student work: How the City University of New York and the New York Performance Standards Consortium are collaborating toward equity*. Learning Policy Institute; Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School; Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School. *Why Fannie Lou?*

Additional Resources

Quality Performance Assessment

- [Assessing Learning in the Classroom](#), Jay McTighe and Steve Ferrara, National Education Association: This book describes common principles for effective assessment that educators can use to ensure that assessments inform teaching and improve learning. The authors look at the strengths and limitations of various assessment approaches and share vignettes of effective classroom assessments in action.
- [Assessing Student Learning by Design: Principles and Practices for Teachers and School Leaders](#), Jay McTighe and Steve Ferrara, Teachers College Press: This book provides educators with guidance on how to use assessments to gather relevant data and promote learning. Through its Assessment Planning Framework, it helps educators match assessments to purpose, goals, and content and provides insights on how assessments can promote student growth and instructional improvement.
- [Performance Assessment Resource Bank](#): The Performance Assessment Resource Bank is an online collection of performance tasks and resources—collected from educators and organizations across the United States and reviewed by experts in the field—to support the use of performance assessment for meaningful learning.

- [Quality Criteria for Systems of Performance Assessment for School, District, and Network Leaders](#), Larkin Willis, Aneesha Badrinarayan, and Monica Martinez, Learning Policy Institute: This resource is designed to guide school, district, and network leaders in identifying high-leverage opportunities to advance performance assessment systems and outlining next steps that fit their specific contexts.
- [Quality Performance Assessment: A Guide for Schools and Districts](#), Center for Collaborative Education: This guide describes the process of creating high-quality performance assessments supported by professional development. It also offers tools that can assist educators during this process.

Graduate Profiles

- [Are Graduate Profiles a Fad? Or a Real Fix?](#), Tony Monfiletto, Future Focused Education: This blog post highlights some of the pitfalls with current efforts to establish Graduate Profiles and explains how Graduate Profiles can be transformative tools if they are viewed as promises to young people rather than projections by adults.
- [Deeper Learning and the Graduate Profile](#), San Francisco Unified School District: This web page describes San Francisco Unified School District's Graduate Profile and how it is organized around principles of deeper learning.
- [Remodeling Our System of Assessments in New Mexico](#), Deborah Good, Future Focused Education: This white paper provides a clear overview of why state assessment systems should shift toward performance assessment and what an assessment system for deeper learning could look like. The appendix includes the Central New Mexico Graduate Profile, which is organized around deeper learning competencies.
- [Why Graduate Profiles](#), Scaling Student Success: This website provides examples of graduate profiles from districts across California.

Examples of School and District Performance Assessment Systems

- [California Performance Assessment Collaborative \(CPAC\)](#), Learning Policy Institute: This web page provides information, videos, and lessons captured from the students, educators, policymakers, and researchers in CPAC who are working to study and advance the use of authentic approaches to assessment that require students to demonstrate applied knowledge of content and use of 21st-century skills.
- [New York Performance Standards Consortium](#): The Consortium is a network of schools founded over two decades ago that has successfully put performance assessments into practice. It has also helped build systems that enable authentic assessments to be used as alternatives to standardized testing to gauge student progress and competency. Their website offers tasks and rubrics used for portfolio construction and scoring, as well as examples of student work.

- [The Power of Performance Assessments: Oakland Unified’s Graduate Capstone Project](#), Learning Policy Institute: In this video, seniors from the Oakland Unified School District say they’ll be reaping the benefits and keeping alive the passions that came with their yearlong Graduation Capstone Project as they move on to college and work.
- [Using Performance Assessments to Support Student Learning: How District Initiatives Can Make a Difference](#), Anna Maier, Julie Adams, Dion Burns, Maya Kaul, Marisa Saunders, and Charlie Thompson, Learning Policy Institute: This research series examines the key conditions needed to support the implementation of high-quality performance assessments at the district, school, and classroom levels. Individual case studies explore performance assessment systems in three districts—Los Angeles Unified School District, Oakland Unified School District, and Pasadena Unified School District—while a cross-case report surfaces common themes and findings from across the settings.