



## I Want to Know More

### A Leadership in Action Supplement

I Want to Know More is a selection of information and resources for education leaders, parents, and community members who want to learn more about the teaching and learning strategies taking place in today's most innovative schools.

### What is Performance Assessment?

Traditional paper-and-pencil tests provide opportunities to gauge the extent to which students have mastered specific knowledge and skills. While these kinds of snapshot assessments are useful, they don't fully capture the kinds of learning students must demonstrate to address the lengthy, complex, and rigorous tasks associated with career- and college-readiness. Assessments such as these that offer opportunities for students to show educators, their communities, and themselves what they know and can do—often called performance assessments—enable students to learn as they complete the assessment.

Performance assessments can also improve teacher effectiveness. To collaboratively develop, calibrate, and reflect on performance assessments and the scoring guides used to evaluate them, teachers must engage in thoughtful collegial discussions about their practice and how it can be improved. These experiences are powerful professional development opportunities. And teachers that create and implement performance assessments increase the time they spend engaged in instruction and student support.

The recently passed federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) allows states to develop their own approaches to assess student achievement. Because standardized tests don't provide a full picture of learning that can inform and sustain meaningful teaching and learning, some states are opting to reduce their reliance on **standardized tests** that were so prevalent during the No Child Left Behind era. Instead, policymakers are strengthening or adding alternate forms of assessment, including performance assessment, to provide evidence of student achievement while simultaneously deepening student learning and improving instruction.

### Characteristics of Performance Assessment

Sometimes called **demonstrations of learning** or **exhibitions**, performance assessments generally include one or more of the following characteristics:

- **Complexity:** Performance assessments tend to be demonstrations of cumulative effort. They offer opportunities to assess work done over a length of time, are often cross-disciplinary, and include multiple components.
- **Transferable skills demonstration:** Performance assessments allow evaluation of skills such as problem-solving, communication, and self-direction that are critical for college and career readiness.
- **Public presentation:** As part of performance assessments, students often present their work to teachers, peers, and others like mentors and internship supervisors (e.g., testifying in front of a legislative body or presenting a portfolio to a jury of community members).

- **Significance:** Performance assessments are significant events in that they usually serve as a culminating demonstration of learning at the end of a unit, level, or grade, and often require students to apply multiple skills and a variety of knowledge to a novel challenge.

Performance assessments vary in response to their aims. Common examples include science experiments, public presentations, and debates. Performance assessments may also be called authentic assessments because they ask students to engage in demonstrations of learning much more akin to what they'll encounter outside of school. A student may, for example, be asked to address a current, community-based issue, and could choose to explore the environmental impact of the construction of a proposed development in their city. Consequently, performance assessments may be more accurate and meaningful evaluations of learning achievement than traditional tests.

## How Do Performance Assessments Deepen Student Learning?

Performance assessments deepen student learning by creating meaningful opportunities for students to develop **transferable skills** that allow them to succeed in school, careers, and other arenas of adult life. Let's look at a sample performance assessment from the **Performance Assessment Resource Bank** to understand how this can happen. Designed as a week-long task to assess students' understanding at the end of a unit, the "car loan" performance assessment task asks students to imagine that they have secured a car loan and must make choices to determine the most financially advantageous loan scenario. After researching used cars, they consider their (imagined) monthly income. Given three loan options, students calculate loan costs and create an amortization schedule for their car purchase. They also determine tax and insurance rates. The task culminates with students creating graphs to accompany written and oral presentations of their choices of car and loans.

Kim Theriault, a math teacher at Souhegan High School in Amherst, New Hampshire, created this task to assess her integrated math students' understanding of three critical abilities: analysis of information; modeling, design, and problem solving; and use of technology. The task also measures students' ability to understand and use mathematical functions and their communication skills.

Performance assessments provide information and insights that we can't get otherwise. With the car loan task, students have a hands-on opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of functions that is far more relevant and engaging than would be possible with a pencil-and-paper test. Unlike a traditional test, the car loan assessment provides ongoing teaching and learning opportunities that allow students to develop a broader range of skills. While they must start with some basic understanding, students are able to deepen their content understanding as they grapple with the scenarios. This is an assessment that does more than measure—it provides meaningful instruction and learning opportunities, too.

This task also provides teachers with opportunities to assess students on multiple criteria that include content knowledge, analysis, and the transferable communication skills. Because educators are responsible for assessing student work, they're also able to glean immediate feedback. They can see what skills and understandings a student might be missing, and can tailor instruction accordingly.

Performance assessment also lends itself well to discussions among teachers about what constitutes high-quality student work. Educators will often use collaboratively developed methods of assessment such as scoring guides or **rubrics** to evaluate these tasks. This collaboration not only assures reliability across classrooms and schools but also serves as powerful professional development for educators. The sequence of the knowledge and skills that teachers need to implement performance assessment effectively requires that they develop a shared understanding of the learning expectations. This happens when teachers collaboratively develop assessment tasks and aligned **scoring criteria** that are complex and well-aligned to the required level of cognitive demand. This collaboration ensures that teachers provide meaningful and actionable feedback for students.

## Performance Assessment Systems In Action

District and statewide performance assessment systems can meaningfully and deeply change the ways students learn. Such systems allow educators to share resources and support them to collaborate in order to agree on rubrics and other measures of high-quality work. This shores up the reliability of performance assessments.

The Stanford Center on Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE) has recently published a **research brief** that shares four strategies used in 12 states that have integrated performance assessment into their statewide systems. These strategies include:

- Supporting educators, schools, and districts in their use of performance tasks for classroom purposes by investing in professional development;
- Using performance tasks as a component of a graduation requirement, either by creating a graduation portfolio including performance tasks or establishing proficiency requirements that can be demonstrated through the use of performance assessment;
- Using performance assessments for school accountability purposes or replacing statewide standardized tests with performance tasks when possible; and,
- Seeking a waiver from the federal government to alter federal testing requirements and allow performance tasks to be used for federal accountability.

New Hampshire and Vermont, two of the states included in the SCOPE study, have approaches that offer promise and useful direction.

### New Hampshire

With its Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE) initiative, New Hampshire is supporting its **competency-based** approach with a strong commitment to performance assessment. The **PACE initiative** allows districts to reduce reliance traditional standardized tests by incorporating locally developed performance assessments into their assessment system. To ensure high-quality implementation across the state, the New Hampshire Department of Education provides participating districts with performance task exemplars and the opportunity to join a regional support network of schools implementing performance assessment systems.

Currently, PACE is being implemented in New Hampshire districts that submitted an application for participation to the state and met program requirements. But PACE is on its way to statewide implementation as the state department of education works with networks of districts to provide professional learning and collaboration to implement wide-scale performance assessments.

### Vermont

In collaboration with the Great Schools Partnership and local state educators, the State of Vermont Agency of Education created the **Vermont Transferable Skills Assessment Supports** (VTSAS). Focusing on five transferable skills—clear and effective communication; creative and practical problem-solving; informed and integrative thinking; responsible and involved citizenship; and self-direction—the VTSAS system provides scoring guides for assessing performance assessments. Educators can also access performance task models and guidelines for developing performance assessments that will properly measure each transferable skill.

## Where to Go for More Resources

### **Performance Assessment Resource Bank**

A project of the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education; the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity; and the Council of Chief State School Officers, the **Performance Assessment Resource Bank** is an online collection of resources that support the use of performance assessment for meaningful learning. Resources include performance tasks, professional development tools, and examples of the ways schools, districts, and states have integrated performance assessment into their assessment systems. These carefully reviewed resources have been collected from educators and organizations across the United States.

<https://www.performanceassessmentresourcebank.org/>

