



Performance Assessment Re-Emerging in Schools

By [Ross Brenneman](#)

At Fresh Meadows Elementary School in New York City, 1st grade teacher Courtney Horan hands her student, six-year-old Wenika, a copy of the children's book *Surprise Moon*, by Caroline Hatton. Horan listens carefully as Wenika starts reading; this assessment will determine whether Wenika moves on to the next reading level.

The test isn't timed, but Wenika starts rattling off text like she's got somewhere to be. Recognizing that her student might be thrown off by the presence of a reporter, Horan tells Wenika to calm her nerves, slow down, and start again.

Wenika isn't the one to watch, however. That would be Horan, rapidly checking each word the child reads off a book transcript. When Wenika self-corrects, Horan marks that, too, while also watching to see if Wenika reads using syntax or visual cues.

The oral-reading portion requires a 96-percent accuracy rate as a prerequisite to advancing, but students aren't penalized if they self-correct. After the first 100 words, Horan instructs Wenika to read the rest silently.

When she finishes, Wenika is asked to retell the story as

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best as possible and answer a set of reading-comprehension questions. In the end, she nails the test, and advances to the next reading level. Even so, Horan walks her through a couple trouble spots from the selection and offers feedback.

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Horan is using a performance-assessment practice known as running records—in this case, a version designed by the Reading and Writing Project at Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York City. The practice is designed to give young students a chance to demonstrate their reading skills and understanding as a teacher interacts with them and gauges their progress.

Beyond Multiple Choice

In recent months, performance assessment has become a hot topic in education. That's thanks in large part to the **Common Core State Standards**, which are expected to spur the use of performance tasks in classes and on standardized tests. A growing skepticism of the value and use of "bubble-in" answers has also played a role.

In a sense, the idea of performance assessment reflects the old math-class decree to "show your work." The goal is to measure not just the final result but the process a student takes to get there. It's a form of formative assessment designed to match equally deep instruction—the kind of instruction, in other words, that's supposed to flourish under the common core.

"A multiple-choice test isn't a great performative assessment of English/language arts," said Audra Robb, director of performance assessment at the Reading and Writing Project. "It's not like you go to a job interview and they give you a multiple-choice test."

Performance tasks attempt to get into the mind of a student executing the objective. They are as much about the journey as the destination. In chemistry, for example, students might be expected to design an experiment from the ground up that would address a given hypothesis. In math, students might receive a complex story problem that would necessitate multiple types of problem-solving and an ability to communicate comprehension of the underlying standards.

Teachers as Facilitators

Fresh Meadows contracts with Teachers College for professional development, and formally administers the institution's running-records performance assessment for reading and writing four times per year. The first and last instances are used as benchmarks to gauge summer learning loss. However, students are not restricted to a reading level between those formal periods; they can petition for advancement at any time. Indeed, 4th grade teacher Sunita Singh-Jodah noted that students enjoy doing so.

"The kids look forward to getting tested for their reading levels. They come in like, 'Can you test me? Can you test me? Can you test me? You were supposed to test me!'" she said.

It's become a way of life for teachers and students alike.

"For me personally, I don't use [the] running-records sheet, but in my small group, I do look out for decoding, I do look out for fluency," Fresh Meadows 3rd grade teacher Euwon Kim said. "If I'm pulling a specific group for comprehension, I'm asking the literal and inferential

questions, I'm using these components in the back of my mind, but I'm not actually using this running-records sheet."

Kim's instructional habits dovetail with the expectations of Ray Pecheone, executive director of the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity. SCALE helped lead the way on performance assessment during a high point in the 1990s and still remains at the forefront of the movement. The organization designed the archetype performance tasks to be used on the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium's forthcoming common-core-aligned assessments.



First grader Mason Chu, 6, reads while his classmates have reading conferences at P.S. 173 Fresh Meadows School in New York City.
—Melanie Burford for Education Week

"Performance assessment in many ways changes the way in which teachers teach," Pecheone said. "It moves them away from just telling students about what skills and content they need to learn, to moving them from sort of a 'sage on a stage' to more of a facilitator and a coach."

An Assessment Left Behind

At the Bayard Taylor School in New York City, teachers also use the Teachers College running-records program, but that effort only started in earnest during the 2012-13 school year. The elementary school, located on Manhattan's Upper East Side, uses the performance assessment twice each year, mixed in with a range of other tests.

"What we did is we figured out how to align the performance assessment so that it was either a pre-assessment for a unit we were starting, or a post-assessment for a unit we had just finished," 4th grade teacher Jessica Mactas said. "We tried to make it make sense for us and for our kids, and I think we had a lot of support in figuring out how to do that in a thoughtful way so it didn't feel like just an extra task that wasn't helpful to us."

While many teachers speak highly of performance assessments—and while those sentiments are echoed by researchers and administrators—the practice is not formally used in many districts.

It's not a coincidence that, according to experts, performance assessment's popularity plunged in 2001, when President George W. Bush signed the **No Child Left Behind Act** into law. NCLB didn't actually restrict the use of performance assessment, but experts say that the massive volume of testing the law brought on raised issues of capacity.

"The issue is, because we've driven what counts down to 'choose one answer out of five,' there's no incentive for doing that kind of work in the classroom," said Linda Darling-Hammond, a professor of education at the Stanford Graduate School of Education, where she is one of Pecheone's colleagues, and author of a forthcoming book on performance assessment.

Furthermore, performance assessment, by its open-ended nature, necessitates some degree of subjectivity. On a multiple-choice assessment, a student is clearly right or wrong. Performance assessments rely more heavily on educator judgment. That's not inherently a problem—but then, schools don't have to train a Scantron machine.

In effect, Pecheone said, NCLB "drove critical thinking underground," and forced performance assessment along for the ride.

Performance assessment has reemerged, however, with the adoption of the common-core standards by 46 states and the District of Columbia. The standards were designed to reduce the breadth of required knowledge in exchange for a greater depth that many experts agree goes beyond the reach of multiple-choice assessment.

"It is very clear you cannot measure the common-core standards without performance-based assessment, or really any of the other analogous state standards that have been developed looking for 21st-century skills," Darling-Hammond said. "And [school systems] can say, 'Well, we're going to aspire to [those skills] but we're not going to try to ask kids to do it.' Well, at some point you gotta ask them to engage in the work."

The 10 districts now operating under the California Office of Reform Education, or CORE, have taken that idea to heart. In 2012, the CORE districts, which include Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Sacramento, undertook a grassroots effort to **design and integrate performance assessments**, which were piloted in the fall of that year by 400 teachers.

New Hampshire, too, **has aggressively pushed** to implement performance assessments. The Granite State solicited help from the Center for Collaborative Education and the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, and intends to have a set of performance tasks ready for field testing by September 2014.

Performance Anxiety

While experts emphasize that the common standards and performance assessment need each other, they also say that there are still kinks to be worked out in the partnership.

Pecheone says that new technology and strategies have narrowed some of the capacity issues performance assessment faced in the '90s but that implementation and professional-development issues remain.

"[Performance assessment] has a significant influence on the way in which teachers may conduct instruction, and that's going to require resources to build their capacity around these new assessments," Pecheone said. "If you do the training and scoring, then it can be a reliable and valid assessment system."

In fact, the teachers at Fresh Meadows and Bayard Taylor in New York receive a great deal of professional development both generally and around performance assessment. Teachers at Bayard Taylor estimate that they receive about four hours of in-school professional development each week.

"I think any time there's a new thing being implemented in the city, it can seem a little overwhelming," said 4th grade teacher Mactas. "But what was great for us is we do have staff developers who came and talked to us about the purpose of the performance assessment and how to use it. So we

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talked a lot about how to use it in a way that made sense for us."

In addition, Mactas' colleague, 2nd grade teacher Lisa Miller, said the school gives each grade's teachers flexibility about when to use performance assessment.



"It's not just like the school shuts down for two days and goes, 'Performance assessment time!'" Miller said. "We decide, as a grade, when we're going to do it and how we're going to do it."

Teachers College's Robb noted that performance assessment might initially seem like a hard sell to wary teachers, but many like the end result.

"Most teachers really do want to see their teaching have an effect, and I think that's the cool thing about it. Once you get really into it, you do start seeing it as a sort of feedback on your own teaching," she said.

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