

In assessing student learning, one size doesn't fit all

New York's Education Department responded to standardized testing during COVID with restraint, but the Biden administration chose to embrace a [doomed mandate](#), rejecting all requests for waivers despite the trauma of the pandemic. The U.S. Department of Education once again demonstrated its failure to imagine a better way to assess learning.

It should pay more attention to New York, where a viable assessment option has flourished.

For more than two decades, a group of 38 public high schools in the [New York Performance Standards Consortium](#) that have successfully implemented a system of performance-based assessment. Their demographics reflect the overall New York City high school population, with schools located in diverse communities across the city and upstate.



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Performance-based assessment is a wholly different approach to accountability. The traditional standardized test is *imposed on* the classroom and forces teachers to teach to the test, severely narrowing curriculum in an effort to preserve school (not individual student) ratings. Performance assessment *grows out of* the classroom: from what students are learning and exploring, the give-and-take of

discussions, the relationship and trust that grows between teachers and students, and the deep knowledge teachers have of their discipline and students.

In performance assessment classrooms, students are expected to grapple with complexity and analysis; evaluate multiple perspectives; develop both arguments and probing questions. They write analytical papers across the disciplines (literature, history, science, math) and defend their work before panels of external evaluators. Student work becomes the prime evidence of what students know and can do, instead of standardized test scores, which are poor facsimiles of actual knowledge.

The consortium system is teacher-developed, student-focused and externally reviewed. Its success rests on the collaboration of its teachers, the inquiry-based instruction of its classrooms, its culture of reflection and revision, and the emphasis on student voice and choice. In other words, it requires a fundamental shift in teaching and learning, which has been [cited](#) as necessary for truly meaningful assessment.

For decades, students have graduated and successfully enrolled in colleges from consortium schools. In a recent [study](#), the City University of New York found our graduates to be equal to or surpassing students from other public and specialized high schools.

The message is clear: One size need not fit all. That has been a hard lesson for policy wonks: despite being a pervasive billion-dollar industry with advocacy from wealthy foundations, mandated standardized testing has not produced significant educational gains. Nor does it provide the specific information parents want to know about their child's growth and potential.

Further, widely published test data only confuse a child's individual progress with the broader purpose of accountability for districts, cities and states.

If we want to know how school systems are doing, better tools are available. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the "gold standard" in national accountability, tests *samples* of students every four years and publishes the [Nation's Report Card](#), proving we needn't test every child every year. Grade spanning, another example, used widely in Europe, tests students only once in elementary, middle and high school.

These tools avoid the harmful ranking of annual standardized tests forced upon all children, which punish whole groups of students — convincing them they are not

of value — and result in a lower level of curriculum and instruction. With its focus on memorization, formulaic writing and rote learning, standardized test-driven instruction curtails the fundamental changes needed in classrooms.

Performance assessment breaks the monopoly. Ironically, some have commercialized it, marketing “PBA banks” of pre-packaged tasks; others have misused it as a supplement to standardized testing; still others pay insufficient attention to the quality of student work produced. Such versions lack the depth and innovative spirit of a fully-developed performance assessment system.

This means of assessing student learning is not for everyone and by no means should it be imposed on unwilling groups of schools. We know from the scaling up of the Common Core debacle that real change takes commitment, time and intensive professional training. It should be a *choice*, not a mandate.

But the longevity and success of the consortium have demonstrated that multiple options for assessment and accountability are possible. States can have more than one system. It's time to open up possibilities for more communities to make that choice about the type of assessment they want for their children and their schools.

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