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N.Y.C. High School Strives for 'Authentic' Assessment

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New York City

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Tiffany Mungin spent many nervous weeks researching and writing her paper about the Vietnam War. Her high school graduation was on the line.

Unlike most New York state seniors, who vied for their diplomas by taking the state's standardized tests, Ms. Mungin had to write a history research paper and an analytic essay in English/language arts. She also had to conduct an original science experiment and undertake an applied-mathematics project in order to graduate. The 18-year-old's work would have to be evaluated by at least two teachers, and she would have to defend it in formal presentations to panels of educators.

This is the way mastery is assessed at Tiffany's school, East Side Community High School in Manhattan. It's one of 48 schools in the **New York Performance Standards Consortium**, which have permission to use projects for graduation instead of the state-mandated standardized tests known as the Regents. As national debate intensifies about testing, East Side High offers a glimpse into an alternative way of sizing up student learning.

There's reason to pay attention to that alternative, too. **Research on the consortium schools shows that while they serve larger proportions of low-achieving students than New York City schools in general, they produce higher graduation and college-enrollment rates. These students show staying power in college, too: Tracking data on consortium students shows that three-quarters enroll for a second year, a little higher than the national persistence rate.**

At East Side, 82 percent of students graduate high school within four years, while citywide, that figure is 68 percent. An average of 69 percent of East Side graduates enroll in postsecondary programs within six months of graduating, compared with 51 percent citywide. Of the East Side students who go to college, three-quarters enroll in four-year institutions.

The consortium's approach to assessment dates back to the mid-1990s, when a group of schools won a waiver from the state department of education to use more "authentic" ways of assessing

The advertisement for SAS features the company logo and tagline 'THE POWER TO KNOW.' Below this, the headline reads 'Engage them.' followed by the sub-headline 'Free resources, tools and apps to enhance teaching & learning.' An orange call-to-action button says 'Discover SAS® Curriculum Pathways®'. The background image shows a teacher and several students gathered around a table, looking at a laptop screen in a classroom setting.

student learning. Part of the burgeoning small-schools movement in New York City, those schools sought a more personalized way of teaching students, and emphasized project-based learning, and application of ideas to real-life things.

Facing the Evaluators

Ms. Mungin's 60-minute social studies presentation reflected those values. She had stepped outside the main focus of her law and justice class to research something that intrigued her: why so many U.S. soldiers in Vietnam turned against the war they were fighting. On a mid-June morning, she took her seat to present and defend her work, sitting opposite her teacher, Ben Wides, and the principal of a Bronx high school, David Vazquez. Both had already read her eight-page paper according to the **consortium's shared grading rubrics**, evaluating her analysis, her viewpoint and use of evidence, her sourcing, organization, and "voice."

Using the Power Point deck on her laptop, Ms. Mungin presented the highlights of her argument. She said that soldiers turned against the war because of the harsh conditions they confronted in Vietnam, and because they came to believe their own government was lying to them about the war. Both men took notes as they listened.

Then the questions began: Can you be a little more specific about the things the soldiers felt the government was lying about? Who was lying? You mentioned that Vietnam was under a dictatorship; what do you mean by that? Your paper mentions how these soldiers experienced very different conditions and support than during World War II. Can you elaborate? Was it wrong for Americans who protested the war to blame the soldiers who had gone to fight it?

The two educators took Ms. Mungin outside the scope of her paper, too, asking her to make connections between that period and the Iraq war, and to expand on her thoughts about why governments lie, and whether they still do so today.

They thanked her and asked her to step into the hall. Mr. Wides and Mr. Vazquez shared their thoughts and notes on her presentation, judging her opening remarks and her response to questions separately. They evaluated them against the multiple factors in the consortium's shared rubrics, rating each one "outstanding," "good," "competent" or "needs revision." They agreed that her thesis should be clearer, and that she should strengthen her evidence that soldiers were actually being lied to, not just feeling deceived.

Shifting from foot to foot in the hallway, Ms. Mungin said it was "nerve-wracking" to wait for their findings. "They didn't show any facial expression, so I couldn't tell, was I doing good or not?" she said.

As it turned out, she worried needlessly. When Mr. Wides and Mr. Vazquez invited the teenager back into the classroom, they told her that her project met the standard for high school graduation. They detailed their feedback on each aspect of the paper and presentation, and most of it fell in the "good" or "competent" range. The only revision required for graduation would be properly formatting her bibliography. Their other suggestions were optional fixes she could make to improve the paper, which counts for 30 percent of her social studies grade.



Damian Zafian, left, gives a science presentation during roundtable forums at East Side Community High. The forums are set up for students to present their semester's research and work in core curriculum areas to fellow students, teachers, and other guest specialists.

—Mark Abramson for Education Week

Working Up To It

Students at East Side spend months, even years, getting ready for these presentations. The school enrolls 650 students in grades 6 to 12, and all students do 30-minute “roundtable” presentations in their core subjects twice a year. Requiring analysis and oral explanation, they’re smaller versions of the high-stakes projects that Ms. Mungin did to graduate. Students who spend all seven years at East Side will produce about 50 such offerings by the time they receive diplomas.

In one classroom in mid-June, 9th grade science students were presenting roundtables to groups of teachers and fellow students. One girl was explaining a home energy audit she had conducted, and another was explaining how she had used a sound meter to monitor the volume in an iPhone, an inquiry into averting possible hearing damage. Around the corner, an 8th grade math student stood in front of two teachers and a fellow student, using an overhead video projector to explain how he did the calculations to expand an image by 50 percent.

Staunch advocates of East Side’s way of learning, and testing, argue that it builds not only content knowledge, but the skills to apply it to real-life situations, to make arguments and interpretations with it, and to present and defend it orally. Principal Mark Federman said that those skills—even more than the content—offer students enduring strengths in college.

“Especially for kids who are used to feeling marginalized, to be able to walk into a college and speak up, to tell an adult what you think and why, creates a sense of entitlement, an empowerment, they didn’t have before,” he said. “And that carries over to things like getting what you need at the housing office. Getting your work noticed. They can advocate for themselves.”

Those strengths may be showcased in the performance assessment, but they’re built through a different kind of teaching, consortium advocates said.

“If you want kids to write well, to handle multiple points of view, do science and not just read it, apply math and not just do it, read books and discuss various aspects of literature, then you have to teach them in a way that helps kids get those kinds of skills,” said Ann Cook, who founded one of New York’s best-known small schools, Urban Academy, and helps lead the consortium.

“That means a different kind of teaching. Inquiry-based, emphasizing thinking in depth rather than coverage. You have to find a way to have students take ownership, so they care about the projects they do, and the papers they write. You have to create a culture of revision, like, ‘That’s a good point, extend it. Do another draft.’”



Mikey Arcay, 13, an 8th-grader at East Side Community High, solves a math problem during the end-of-semester roundtable forum.
—Mark Abramson for Education Week

That’s the culture Javier Montero came from as an East Side High graduate. Now a rising junior at the State University of New York at New Paltz, Mr. Montero has a 3.0 grade-point average and plans a career in mechanical engineering. He said that while fellow students in his English composition classes “freaked out” about writing five-page papers, he was calm, because he was used to writing papers two or three times that long.

“The way I study for my math and science exams now is the way I prepared for my roundtables

and [end-of-year presentations] at East Side," he said. "I would study everything from the entire semester, not just stuff for my project, because I knew there would be a lot of questions and answers, and I had to know everything."

'Ready to Excel' in College

Darryl Jones is the senior associate director of admissions at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania. He recruits students from East Side High, and he says their college preparation stands out as solid.

"I have sat in on classes, and the teachers teach the classes as if they were teaching college," he said. "They emphasize more thought, more reasoning, more critical analysis. There is a lot of discussion in the classroom, and less is done by rote memory, so these kids are ready to excel in college. They're not sitting passively and just absorbing a lecture. They're learning to ask the right questions. When you look at highly selective colleges, that's what it's all about."

Gettysburg is one of a growing number of colleges that make admissions tests like the ACT and the SAT optional, instead evaluating students on their grades, essays, and other things. But selective colleges that require national admissions tests can pose barriers to some consortium students, since many come from low-income families with little history of formal education, factors linked to lower scores on such exams. Nearly nine in 10 East Side students take the SAT, but their average score on the math and critical reading portions totals 863 out of 1600. Their average score on **New York State's English Regents exam**—the only one of the five state-mandated exams that consortium students must take—is 67 out of 100. The passing score is 65.

Advocates of the consortium's approach to learning and testing contend that those results show a mismatch between the deep learning in the network's classrooms and the kinds of knowledge that are tested on the Regents, which are dominated by multiple-choice questions and require no writing longer than a short essay.

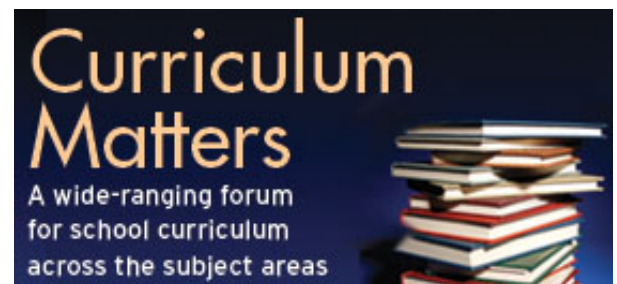
Strands of skepticism have dogged the schools' approach to declaring graduation-level competency, however. One state department of education staff member who is familiar with the consortium's work said that in most cases, the assessments are "quite rigorous," but in some, the interactions during testing have raised doubts about the tests' validity.

"You see these cases where a teacher, because she cares about the student, is walking her through her presentation, pushing the quality of what she knows she can deliver. It's not cheating, but it's a confused interaction," said the staffer, who asked not to be named. "It's not totally about proficiency and mastery. It's about what you can produce with the right support. Many of the kids who can do it are ready for college. But many can't do it without the support, and that support won't be there when they go to college."

Tom Mullen, one of East Side High's assistant principals, conceded that the distinction between assessment and instruction can be "a touchy point," largely because the consortium is grounded on the belief that roundtables and year-end presentations are as much a learning experience as classroom instruction.

"Critics say they're fluffy," he said. "It's tough: If we wade too much into having [year-end presentations] be

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a teachable moment, they won't be a valid assessment.

We have to watch that line. But we do.

"We're teaching, and assessing, what we think really matters. And judging by our students' experiences in college, I'd say we're onto something."

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