

Bye-bye bubble sheets: New Hampshire's innovative approach to testing appeals to Indiana, other states

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Students in an English-learner class at Southport High School work on an assignment during the last period of the day. (Photo by Shaina Cavazos)

As Indiana awaits recommendations from a committee that's trying to figure out [what student exams will look like after 2017](#), one idea out of New Hampshire is capturing the attention of educators.

New Hampshire's "performance tasks" are considered some of the most innovative standardized tests in the country, but they don't look much like standardized tests at all.

The new pilot program in the Granite State — called Performance Assessment of Competency Education or PACE — moves away from the computerized testing and multiple-choice bubble sheets that have been the backbone of annual state exams for decades.

In their place, the PACE program asks kids in the eight pilot districts to do “performance tasks” throughout the school year to show deep understanding of the subjects they’re studying.

For example, while a traditional geometry exam might ask students to

solve math problems and even require them to show how they calculated their answer, New Hampshire now asks them to complete complex problems applied to real-world situations that require a range of skills and knowledge they've been learning in class.

"We asked the kids to be a town planner, and as part of that planning board they are asked to design two towers that use solids," said Lee Sheedy, a New Hampshire high school geometry teacher who's been working on the [new test questions](#) since the pilot began in 2014. "One would be a simple solid and the other had to be a compound solid. They then write a proposal to the town recommending one of the towers."

To complete the task, students must draw models, do calculations, analyze results and write a proposal all in one exercise, Sheedy said.

Students in the pilot districts take the Smarter Balanced exam — a more traditional standardized test that is used in more than a dozen states — in third-grade English, fourth-grade math and eighth-grade English and math. All high-school juniors take the SAT.

In the rest of the grades, students must complete performance tasks in math, English and science throughout the year according to where those tasks fall in the curriculum. Some of the tasks are "local," which help districts measure student progress at certain points in the academic year, but others are "common" which can be compared across districts.

Once the tasks are completed, the classroom teachers grade them. "Common" tasks are scored and then validated by the state against predetermined sample answers.

For both common and local questions, teachers are trained for about two weeks over the course of the year by their peers to use the scoring guides to grade student answers. Then, for the common questions, teachers compare their scoring processes to those of teachers' from other schools and districts to ensure they are accurate. Final scores are reported to the state for accountability purposes.

For the [water tower problem](#), there were [four possible scores](#) a student could receive and three main areas where they needed to

show work: models and scale drawings, calculations and mathematical strategy and communication, analysis and recommendation.

Kathleen Cotton, a curriculum and instruction coach in Sheedy's district in Rochester, New Hampshire, said that although there is extra work involved on the front end, the performance tasks give teachers information they can use immediately.

"You look at some of this high-stakes testing that we have, and it really is not engaging at the time because the students don't really have any buy-in except of that one score at the end," Cotton said.

Throughout the pilot, Sheedy said his students have been more engaged than they were taking traditional exams. He's never seen kids so focused as when they are working on the new types of tests.

"When you give students a real world problem, you allow them to be creative, you allow them to think critically," Sheedy said. "They get incredibly motivated. If you walked into my room during PACE you could hear a pin drop."

He's also been impressed by how much by how much developing the tasks has helped him as a teacher.

"When you let teachers ... get out of their classrooms and you look at student work and you talk about it, teachers become better teachers," Sheedy said. "Their ability to instruct and assess, it increases exponentially. I have grown more as a teacher since I've been doing PACE than any other thing I've been doing in the classroom over the last 12 years."

The teacher-led work in designing and learning to grade the tasks was significant. Teams of teachers worked on the questions themselves and the scoring guides to grade them.

The New Hampshire experiment is making ripples across the country as more and more states are looking for alternatives to traditional once-a-year testing methods.

States looking for new options are encouraged by changes to federal

testing regulations that are expected next year when the No Child Left Behind Act is replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act. The new law still requires every state to create an accountability system that measures annual student performance, but this law allows more flexibility. As many as seven states could be chosen to try new, innovative exams.

The work to completely change a testing system isn't easy, and for larger states with more diverse student populations, varied funding across districts and stricter accountability systems, like Indiana, [it's not clear if this model would see the the same kind of success](#) that it's seen in New Hampshire.

It's also not clear if Indiana education officials are going to even pursue an innovation pilot under ESSA, although state Superintendent Glenda Ritz and House Education Committee Chairman Bob Behning have expressed interest in New Hampshire's model.

Many Indiana educators say they're frustrated with years of ISTEP exams that have seen major delays, [results that don't do much to guide instruction](#) and computer testing glitches. Some say they're ready to try something new, and state officials agree.

For now, said Danielle Shockey, Indiana's deputy state superintendent, the state will focus on its work with the new testing committee before it gets involved in a new federal initiative.

"There's a lot left to be learned about that innovation pilot," Shockey said.