

## High School Reform

# Presentations and portfolios take the place of tests for some students

*High schools may use an alternate graduation path for students who stumble on the 'normal' route*

by **GAIL ROBINSON**

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NEW YORK — One afternoon this spring, tension ran high at [City-As-School](#) in Manhattan's Greenwich Village. In drab classrooms, students, many of whom have struggled with school, presented research that would determine whether they would graduate this year. Fellow students listened, murmuring words of encouragement as two teachers pressed the speakers on their findings.

Tianna Monroe, 18, had two presentations: the first one, for math, was on the costs and benefits of consumer financial instruments; the other was on racism. Her nerves showed. "I've never presented before," she said, trying to steady her voice and taking deep breaths. "You're doing fine," another student assured her.

Tianna's social studies project aimed to refute the "dominant narrative"



**Maria Krajewski, art teacher and internship coordinator, oversees City-as-School students working on individual projects.** Photo: Alan Cheng, City-as-School

that racism is largely dead in the United States. She described divisions in New York City, race in the current presidential campaign, depictions of black life in films (“sex, gangs, drugs, death,” she said) and prejudice favoring light-skinned over darker-skinned African-Americans. The teacher, E.M. Eisen-Markowitz, questioned Tianna on her findings and methodology.

“Why didn’t you write your whole paper on media?”  
the teacher asked.

“I didn’t think it would make a very strong paper. The  
presidential campaign is fresh,” Tianna answered.



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Eisen-Markowitz seemed impressed. “It’s clear you found an issue that was personally relevant to you and turned it into an academic paper,” Eisen-Markowitz concluded. As the session ended, Tianna was one step closer to graduation.

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**Brian Stecher, senior social scientist at the RAND Corporation**

Would more students benefit from the process Tianna completed? Do presentations, projects and portfolios give a better idea of what a student has learned than a class grade or a score on a standardized exam? And are they particularly valuable for students who have struggled in traditional high school classes?

Many advocates believe that adopting such an approach to assessment for all students could spur teaching that aims to encourage thinking and reasoning, rather than just passing a test.

“The bottom line for now is we need to broaden what counts in education, so I’m in favor of moving in this direction even if we lose a little bit of precision to get there,” said Brian Stecher, senior social scientist at the RAND

Corporation.

But worries persist that replacing conventional tests with “performance assessments” could lead to a weakening of standards and a cheapening of the high school diploma.

It is easier to say what performance assessment is not – a bubble test or short-answer exam – than to describe what it is. In some instances, students present a portfolio of work. In others, they do projects – designing a science

**Gary Gordon, math teacher and advisor at City-as-School, is working with students to design and develop a wooden race car for a class focused on engineering and design.** Photo: Alan Cheng, City-as-School

experiment, preparing and presenting a business plan for a product they have designed, making a video – or perform a sharply defined task.

Chemistry students in one school, for example, [research different compounds](#), make a model of their own compound, create a video about it and then debate the substances' effectiveness.

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Such tasks are designed to let students show that they've mastered skills and knowledge while giving them some choice in how they demonstrate their competency. For example, Tianna's assignment was to examine a dominant narrative; focusing on racism was her choice.

Proponents argue that providing this “alternative path” enables students who may not be good test-takers to get a high school diploma. City-As-School, a public school of about 650 students that opened in 1972, has pioneered alternative assessment in part because many of the students it serves have tripped over the conventional hurdles to high school graduation.

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But the approach also appeals to the growing number of policymakers and educators who have doubts about the validity of standardized tests.

**“The whole problem with alternative assessments is the fact that they are not standardized,**

With many experts finding little correlation between passing an exit exam and finding success in college or the job market, some states are looking for alternatives. In 2016, 17 states required students to pass one or more exit exams to graduate (down from a peak of 25 states in 2012), according to Jennifer Dounay Zinth, director of high school and STEM at

**so they are subject to variability and impression.”**

**Robert Pondiscio, senior fellow and vice president for external affairs at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute**

the [Education Commission of the States](#).

Some states without exit exams simply mandate that students pass all their required courses. Others are considering using existing tests, such as the SAT, ACT or the online PARCC assessment. Mississippi, for one, [last year dropped](#) its requirement that all students pass four subject area tests and now lets

students qualify to graduate in a number of ways, including a score of 17 or higher on the relevant ACT.

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And several states are exploring performance assessment, allowing it in individual districts, in selected schools or for certain students. Maryland, for example, allows students who fail its more traditional exit test to substitute a project demonstrating they have mastered key skills.

Pennsylvania has plans to put such a system in effect by the end of the decade and a similar approach has been proposed in New York. In these states, performance assessment would be tacked on to the regular high school curriculum.

Some New York state schools, though, use performance assessment for all their students, and have been doing so for decades. In the approximately 40 schools in the [Performance Standards Consortium](#), alternative assessments infuse the entire program. Throughout the students' high school careers, these schools emphasize learning skills rather than facts, offering an education that proponents say is driven by a student's passion and encourages a quest for deeper learning.

While some schools in this consortium serve top students, a few are for English language learners and several are geared to students who have had difficulties elsewhere. City-As-School is among the latter. It generally accepts only students at least 17 years of age, including some who are 20 or 21; many have just half the credits required for graduation. Students take only one Regents exam – English – as opposed to the five required for graduation at most New York state schools.

Students arrive at City-As-School for “every reason you can think of,” said a longtime teacher, Katy Bolger. “These kids as individuals all had something go wrong in their education,” she said.

The school does not work miracles. Its graduation rate lags behind that of the city as a whole. That said, a [recent city report](#) found City-As-School sets high standards and holds students to them, emphasizing “rigorous habits and higher-order skills.”

Tianna and her classmate Baleria Guzman, also 18, had difficulties in

**Heather Cardinale, special education teacher and internship coordinator, is preparing students for a project focused on the inner workings of art galleries in New York City.** Photo: Alan Cheng, City-

their previous high schools and City-As-School said they were glad they had come to City-As-School. “They make sure you understand what you’re doing and why you’re doing it,” said Tianna, who plans to attend the Borough of Manhattan Community College.

Baleria said she transferred to City-As-School because of the frequent fights at her old school and because the state exams required for graduation posed a real challenge for her. “I have test anxiety. I black out when I see a test,” she said.

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She is not alone. Whether because of test anxiety or other reasons, students in states with exit exams are generally less likely to graduate than those in states without the tests, according to [research compiled](#) by Advocates for Children of New York. The gap is especially pronounced for English language learners and students with disabilities.

**“You can teach to the test. They can be corrupted just like a performance assessment can be corrupted.”**

Eve Goldberg, director of research at the Nellie Mae Education Foundation

Tests “have been found again and again to be culturally biased,” said Dan French, executive director of the [Center for Collaborative Education](#), a Boston nonprofit that promotes innovation in education. “If you allow kids to demonstrate what they know and are able to do in a diverse way, then the diversity of kids that we serve will be able to demonstrate what they know in a way that works for them.”

In places that have exit exams, some students find themselves taking the tests over and over, slowing their progress through high school, limiting their ability to take other classes and possibly even blocking them from graduation.

Maryland’s Bridge Plan is aimed at these children. If a student fails one

of the four required tests twice, the student receives individualized instruction in that area and can then demonstrate his or her proficiency by completing a project that addresses those skills. About 8 percent of the state's high school graduates got their diplomas with the help of Bridge, according to state education officials.

Pennsylvania laid the groundwork for a similar approach when it adopted Keystone Exams, now set to go into effect for the class of 2019. As originally framed, the program would have allowed project-based assessments for students who did not pass one of the three required tests. However, many local superintendents expressed concern about the logistics involved and the resources that might be required, and the state [is now reviewing](#) the idea.

While these efforts focus on specific students, New Hampshire is taking a broader approach. Its [Performance Assessment of Competency Education](#) (PACE) program is experimenting with trying to change the way students are evaluated throughout their years in school. Deputy Commissioner of Education Paul Leather said, "We probably would not do it as a state requirement" for graduation but would encourage it because it is good practice.

In general, statistics on performance assessment have been positive. [A study](#) of the schools in the New York Performance Standards Consortium, using 2009 figures, found that performance assessment school students were as likely or more likely to graduate than similar students in New York City high schools overall. When compared to the regular city schools, the performance assessment schools did particularly well with English language learners and students with disabilities. The report also found that 2008 graduates from assessment schools were more likely to remain in college for a second year than were graduates of other schools.

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French cites a 2010 study of graduates of three Boston schools that used performance assessment. “We got back a pretty unanimous sentiment that they were much more prepared to tackle the unknown” and also more skilled than other students in accessing resources, presenting work and working as a team, he said. These are, according to French, “a very different set of skills than if you’re just preparing for a standardized test.”

Any effort to expand performance assessment, though, raises questions about the time and effort involved.

Those who support it readily concede that conducting and grading assessments – as well as laying the groundwork for them – require more work than conventional exams. One problem, said Stecher of the RAND Corporation, is coming up “with a general scoring rubric” that can be used for something as high-stakes as determining who does or does not graduate from high school.

Despite those demands, many teachers seem to like the approach. “The biggest surprise is how many teachers and administrators want to do this work,” even though it requires more time and effort, said Esther Soliman, administrator of Linked Learning, a program that includes performance assessment, for the Los Angeles Unified School District.

“It’s work, but it’s meaningful work,” said Linda Darling-Hammond, president of the Learning Policy Institute and a co-author, with Frank Adamson, of “[Beyond Basic Skills: The Role of Performance Assessment in Achieving 21st Century Standards of Learning](#).” She added, “Teachers said, ‘This really helped me know how to teach this course.’”

But many teachers now using performance assessments are self-selected, having volunteered to conduct a pilot project or to teach at a school using the method. Expanding performance assessment, those involved with it agree, will mean reaching teachers who may not have that zeal and providing them with rubrics and sample projects and tasks.

Eve Goldberg, director of research at the [Nellie Mae Education Foundation](#), which promotes student-centered learning, said that

teachers should have a “bank of assessments” created by the state and districts that they can draw upon.

“To have strong performance assessment, you have to think about your staff creatively and your school creatively,” French said. “All of that takes more time, but it’s doable.”

Using performance assessment primarily for struggling students poses a particular quandary because, by most accounts, performance assessment can be more demanding than standardized tests. In Maryland, Bill Reinhard, director of media relations for the state education department, said, many students reject Bridge because it seems too difficult; they would rather try to take the regular test one more time.

Some educators worry that a focus on using performance assessments for struggling students could undermine attempts to expand their use. “I don’t like that approach because I worry about it weakening the field,” Goldberg said. “It suggests there’s a lack of rigor.”

Concerns about rigor are probably inevitable, said Robert Pondiscio, senior fellow and vice president for external affairs at the [Thomas B. Fordham Institute](#). “The whole problem with alternative assessments is the fact that they are not standardized, so they are subject to variability and impression,” he said.

A key issue then becomes who is doing the evaluating and how close those people are to the student, he said, adding, “I’m not assigning any evil intent to this, but teachers look for evidence as much to convince themselves as anything else that the kid is OK.”

Goldberg understands the concerns, but argues that performance assessment can be more rigorous. It aims to provide a measure of a student’s ability to think critically and solve real-world problems, she said, while with standardized tests, “You can teach to the test. They can be corrupted just like a performance assessment can be corrupted.”

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