

SHIFTING TOWARD AN ESSENTIAL SKILLS FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSMENT

By Philip Baker, Danielle Ragavanis | Nov 13, 2025 | Feature Article



A SCHOOL IN QUEENS, NEW YORK, STARTS WITH A TEAM OF CHANGE-MINDED TEACHERS TO EXPERIMENT WITH NEW APPROACHES TO ASSESSMENT.

► At a Glance

The way K-12 schools measure student learning is shifting. Increasingly, states, districts, and schools are looking toward adopting alternative forms of assessments to measure what students know and what they can do ([Education Week, 2019](#)). In New York, where our school is located, the [New York State Department of Education](#) (2024) called on schools to adopt the New York State Portrait of a Graduate and provide alternatives to the New York Board of Regents exams to determine which students have mastered the skills needed to graduate.

Discussion about the benefits of alternative forms of assessments compared to standardized testing has been going on for years. A 2007 review of research by [Carole Janisch, Xiaoming Liu, and Amma Akrofi](#) notes the importance of knowledge about

the theory that undergirds various assessment strategies and their benefits to both students and teachers. When alternative forms of assessment are aligned with theory, they explain, positive student outcomes are the result.

The Research and Development Department at our school, Thomas A. Edison Career and Technical Education High School in Queens, New York (www.taehs.org), has been experimenting with alternative forms of assessments for several years. We have developed a career-centered essential skills framework and rubric to measure the skills students have learned. We've been selected as a PLAN Pilot mentor school for the state of New York as it rolls out its transformation plan.

Making systemwide changes in assessment isn't easy and can't be done quickly. It will take planning, strategy, and the time and space to fail and start again. Our school's journey toward implementing a new model for teaching skills and assessing student learning shows what's involved in the transformation.

OUR APPROACH TO DEEPER LEARNING

The mission of Thomas A. Edison Career and Technical Education High School is to develop leaders of tomorrow by preparing them all to meet the high academic, technical, civic, and workforce challenges of the 21st century. Edison has a diverse student body in which 97% of our 2,200 students are non-white and 75% are economically disadvantaged. We offer 13 career and technical (CTE) programs and more than 20 college-level courses, and we boast a 94% graduate rate.

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We believe in giving teachers the opportunity to be innovators, so we created a Research and Development (R&D) department that has spearheaded multiple initiatives. These include a "student designer" model in which students advise R&D teachers and school administrators on everything from school policies to learning models to specific class assignments. Another is a project-based learning (PBL) model in partnership with PBLWorks that engages students in real-world and personally meaningful projects.

Edison uses the learning framework developed by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe. It's called Acquisition, Meaning, and Transfer (AMT), which focuses on having students

- **Acquire** the information.
- Make **meaning** of content for themselves.
- **Transfer** what they have learned to a real-world scenario.

We've found that students need to be able to see the relevance of what they are learning. We make sure that all our projects include AMT components. We include these components so teachers and students know not only what they are doing, but also why they are doing it and when they will use the skill and content again. This helps the coursework become more relevant for the students.

MOVING TO AN ESSENTIAL SKILLS FRAMEWORK

We have been using a skills-based model for about 13 years; however, we hadn't used it in a formalized way until our R&D department began formalizing processes to build our ideal graduate. We want our ideal graduates to know more than content; we want them to have the skills that will enable them to succeed in college, careers, and life. These include communication, collaboration, and critical-thinking skills, as well as technology and systems thinking skills. Our R&D department studied current job postings and looked at research on what employers are looking for. Through that, we identified five key essential skills:

- Communication
- Collaboration
- Giving, receiving, and reflecting on feedback to produce reflective growth
- Design thinking
- Professionalism, which includes being organized and punctual, adapting to audience needs, networking, and more

We developed our essential skills framework and rubric based on these skills and are now working to build them into our performance-based model of assessment.

Students are still assessed on content, but a big part of the assessment is whether they can demonstrate the skills above. Our rubric addresses things like:

- How well are students communicating when they do a performance-based assessment?
- How well are students asking questions of other students who are doing a performance-based assessment?
- How actionable is the feedback students are giving to their peers?
- How mindful are students at reflecting on their process and talking about what they're doing differently?
- How good are students at collaborating with other people in a meaningful way?
- How good are students at designing digital media that will take an audience on a journey, rather than overwhelming them with content?

The key to the Essential Skills Rubric is explicit use of specific skills. For instance, the teacher doesn't just say to a class, "we're working on communication skills." They build activities that focus on specific elements of communication one at a time, like using eye contact to engage the audience and projecting your voice. The rubric (see Figure 1) shows what is expected in a range from "novice-level audience engagement" to "professional-level audience engagement." Students get many chances to practice and receive feedback from their peers, which all builds into the final assessment.

Skill	Professional level			Novice level
Describing a process	Description is clear, well-organized, and easy to follow. Uses precise language.	Description is mostly clear, organized, and easy to follow.	Description is somewhat clear but may be unorganized and difficult to follow.	Description is unclear, unorganized, and difficult to follow.
Questioning	Asks clear, concise, and relevant questions. Listens carefully to	Questioning is usually clear and relevant but	Questioning is overly wordy and complicated,	Does not ask questions or does so infrequently.

Skill	Professional level			Novice level
	responses and asks pertinent follow-up questions.	at times needs a second asking.	not especially relevant, or too simple.	

PERFORMANCE-BASED ASSESSMENTS

We are still trying out different performance-based assessment models, with specifics varying from classroom to classroom and project to project. One performance-based assessment for a unit on personal narrative in an English class looked like this:

THE PROJECT

Students wrote their own personal narrative and then participated in mock interviews in which they promoted themselves using the information from their narratives.

To prepare for their interview, students practiced by playing the part of an employer and having their teachers interview for a job. The students developed a job description and interview questions and then executed the job interview with the teacher so they could see how a professional would present themselves in an interview and how they would respond to the interview questions. This gave the students perspective of what the process is like from an employer's point of view.

A few weeks later, the students participated in their own mock interview and had to show the skills they had learned.

THE ASSESSMENT

To assess students on this project, the teacher took notes as the students did their interviews and used the Essential Skills Rubric to check off how each student did in each area (professionalism, communication, etc.).

She also assigned some of the students to grade each other. Having the opportunity to be on the other side of the assessment engaged some students more deeply in the assignment.

CREATING CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

Change is hard, and shifting to a skills-based model and performance-based assessment continues to be challenging. We are still reassessing what we want this model to look like. For instance, we have refined the essential skills approach from a comprehensive assessment of multiple skills to an explicit growth-based assessment of just one, regardless of how many skills are being used during the project. This is so that all stakeholders are focused on building that skill alone and students are not overwhelmed with too many expectations.

This is no small task. At schoolwide professional development, we tried to say, “let us support you,” but teachers heard “you’re not good enough.” When we first tried the student designer initiative, some teachers were wary because they thought they were being criticized. This was post-COVID closures. Students were behind, and the teachers were working hard to get them caught up. Having students tell them their way of teaching is “boring” was offensive for some teachers. Because of this, we started with a small pilot group of teachers and administrators open to listening to student feedback.

Education is going to change largely by transforming schools that already exist, and change is hard.

When we scaled too quickly and tried to force teachers to work with students, it backfired and was unpopular with some teachers. What we discovered during this process was that the teachers needed models to see how this would look in the classroom. Some teachers wanted to try new things, but they stated that their biggest obstacle was that their teaching teams all had to be in lockstep. They needed freedom, but they also wanted the support of other teachers to bounce ideas off of or to debrief with following a failed experiment. That was how our R&D department was born. We invited teachers to participate and ended up with a dozen who were willing to engage in the changes we envisioned and fail along with us as we figured out what worked. And teachers gave their honest feedback, which helped improve the process.

We started the essential skills framework with just two teachers. Now there are 12 who are using it, and they are sharing it with the rest of the school. Last year, we developed a ninth-grade team who used the framework, then we made changes based on their experience, and now we are using it more broadly with teachers in all grade

levels. The honest feedback, both positive and negative, has been incredibly valuable for the process. One of our most resistant teachers helped us the most. They asked, “What is this going to look like?” So, we built our system around that question, dedicating ourselves to generating models of practice that our teachers can use. And now we are doing performance-based assessments in various ways to see what works.

WHAT STUDENTS ARE SAYING

The feedback from many students on our essential skills framework and performance-based assessments has been positive. Students are constantly talking about their communication skills and their professionalism. The age-old question of “why are we learning this?” disappears when teachers use this approach.

There are, however, some students who hate the new model. Some students had mastered the old system in which they memorized content and took a test. The old system is black and white. If they get an 84 on the test, it’s done. The new model is more difficult because it’s not just about whether they know the content, it’s about whether they can do something with it. It is more complex and requires them to put themselves out there and make meaning out of the things they’ve learned in the classroom. That can be difficult and can make them feel vulnerable. It’s harder for them to hide in this system. However, even students who struggled with our new system said that it made college or their first job much easier.

STRATEGIES FOR A SMOOTH ROLLOUT

In shifting to focus on the essential skills framework, PBL, and performance-based assessments, we have learned several lessons.

- ***Do not mandate change.*** If you try to push something on someone it won’t work. You might get compliance, but you won’t make real change. Invite volunteers. Create a small pilot or R&D team. Then let those teachers share it with their colleagues organically.
- ***Scale small and represent your population.*** Do not just ask your best and brightest teachers. Have a collection of teachers who are open to the idea but are at various points in their willingness to do the work. This will allow the next step in scaling, to the friends of the early adopters, to be more impactful. Do not implement schoolwide after just one pilot.

- **Expect failure and model it.** Create an environment that celebrates risk-taking by expecting things to fail and celebrate it. Start by creating models in each subject area, and show the entire process — the good, the bad, and the ugly. Being vulnerable as a leader invites others to try since they know they won't need to be perfect the first time. Or the second time.
- **Show off great work.** We are constantly asked, "Show me what it looks like." Our R&D department held a showcase for the school and community in which students presented their learning. Our staff is doing the same with the AMT model. Getting to see the great things other teachers are doing will spread good ideas and demystify change.
- **Communicate and collaborate.** Embarking on something new means there will be lots of questions. When initiative leaders are available to answer questions and bounce ideas off of — and when teachers are able to regularly collaborate with peers to develop projects and share successes and lessons learned — the process is easier for everyone involved.
- **Nothing works for everyone.** There is no magic bullet. Create a variety of options and entry points and keep trying new things. Invite new problems. These will give you new perspectives and opportunities for different members of your staff to volunteer.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Currently our team is continuing to test different performance-based assessments so we can build a repository of models. We will also begin to figure out how to scale the model schoolwide by looking at systems of design. We have learned that just giving models won't change implementation of instruction. Only by creating processes that allow teachers and administrators to use their own interests and skills to complement the interests and abilities of the students, will you create lasting change.

What we — and so many schools across the country — are doing right now is creating a better system that will meet the needs of students, teachers, and the workforce, both today and in the future. Education is going to change largely by transforming schools that already exist, and change is hard. Still, we need to make sure education adapts for the future. By making these important shifts in teaching and assessing student learning, we are better able to prepare our systems and our students for success, whatever the future may hold.

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