

A National Movement for a New Accountability

By [Dan French](#) March 14, 2019

Caroline, a ninth grader at Attleboro High School, was standing in front of a room full of 25 adults, most of whom she had never met. While seemingly shy as she was introduced, she was quite confident as she began to speak. Caroline was presenting one of her ninth grade performance assessments to the [Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment](#) (MCIEA) governing board.

Her class had studied World War II and the Holocaust from multiple lenses. Their performance assessment was to select a theme from their studies and to express it in a visual display. Caroline had built a large open-faced, shed-like structure to represent the theme of hope. The roof had a dove in the middle, the Jewish symbol of hope. Encircling the symbol were 150 stained glass window panes, with each representing 10,000 Jewish children, totaling 1.5 million children murdered in Nazi concentration camps. Inside, on the facing wall, were shadows of men, women, and children who had been discriminated against in this world, surrounded by quotes of concentration camp survivors and those who perished envisioning a better future for the world.

During the question and answer period, Caroline noted that it had been the most meaningful and challenging project that she had ever worked on. Having to create a visual product that symbolized the Holocaust forced her, she said, to research and study primary source material—diaries and journals, interviews, official documents, videos—that she might have never encountered in a traditional unit of study that resulted in an end-of-unit paper and pencil test. She wanted to understand the actual experiences of those involved. She had to reach further with her mind to select the most

important themes for her, translate them into symbolic art, and then be able to speak about her final product to a wider audience. As it turns out, this wasn't her first presentation of her project – she had already done so for parents and community members at an exhibition night of high school student performance assessment work.

Two teachers and an assistant principal followed to explain that for the past two and a half years, Attleboro Public Schools, through membership in MCIEA, has dedicated a large percentage of district professional development to training teachers in the performance assessment cycle of design, validation, field testing, and scoring of student work. They noted how this work has compelled teachers to think differently about their teaching and assessments, striving to engage students in the learning process and requiring them to demonstrate what they know and are able to do in real-world ways. They talked about how the performance assessment design process requires teachers to collaborate in more meaningful ways, as they now regularly engage in task design, task validation, and calibration scoring sessions. Teachers are more enthused about their craft.

MCIEA is a consortium of seven districts representing 10% of the public school students in the state. Consortium members believe that assessment systems should reflect the type of learning we aspire every student to have, much like the example with Caroline above. In particular, in a state with some of the widest achievement gaps by subgroup, assessments should lift up the learning of those students who are most ill-served in a state system driven by a single, high stakes standardized test – Black, Latinx, low-income, and English learner students as well as those with special needs. Thus, the consortium is creating a network-wide performance assessment system to measure student learning and a multiple measures School Quality data dashboard to use as a school improvement tool.

MCIEA alone is not enough. We need a grassroots movement, in Massachusetts and across the nation, of educators, parents, and community

members that come together to advocate for new accountability systems at the local, state, and national levels that engage students and promote self-reflective school improvement. Already, in addition to MCIEA, we are seeing consortia of schools and districts form to create new systems of student assessment and school quality that challenge the status quo.

The New York Performance Standards Consortium comprises about 38 high schools and has a state waiver to forego students having to pass the state's Regents exams except in English language arts; in their place schools use teacher-generated performance assessments and common consortium rubrics to assess students' readiness to graduate. The ten CORE districts in California have created a school quality measures data dashboard to track school progress, and have adopted a process of pairing schools that may be faring poorly in one area with schools in which that area is a strength. The California Performance Assessment Collaborative is a consortium of about 60 schools dedicated to supporting one another in designing and implementing high quality performance assessment systems. And in New Hampshire, federal approval has enabled 10 districts within the Performance Assessment for Competency Education network to forego standardized testing except in one "dipstick" grade in each grade span (elementary, middle, and high), and instead use a combination of local and common performance tasks to make proficiency determinations in English language arts, math, and science.

It is through these efforts to influence and change our state and federal accountability systems that we will bring the type of learning and assessment that Caroline and her teachers spoke so passionately about to become the norm in our schools and districts.