

It's High Time for Change in our Accountability Systems

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By Dan French, Executive Director of the Center for Collaborative Education

Assessment drives what gets taught and how it is taught in our nation's schools. To avoid state sanctions for low performance on high-stakes tests, teaching to the test has become the norm. Too many districts enrolling high percentages of Black, Latino, low-income, and English Language Learner students feel pressured to narrow the curriculum to emphasize those subjects tested (math and English language arts). Joy and curiosity of learning has faded into the background.

A Grassroots and Grasstops Movement for Assessment Reform

It's time for radical change. Assessment should promote our beliefs and values of learning. Our increasingly diverse learners have different cultures, languages, experiences, and ways of learning. Our assessments should promote learning in which students demonstrate their capacity to tackle complex, authentic problems and transfer and apply what they know and can do in diverse ways. We need to rise up and work with legislators, state education departments, boards, and other policymakers for a radically new vision of education accountability, with teachers at the forefront of creating assessments that promote the deeper learning we want for all our children.

New Hampshire has led the way by gaining federal approval to forego state standardized testing for a growing number of districts and replace them with teacher-generated, curriculum-embedded local and common performance assessments (Performance Assessment for Competency Education, or [PACE](#)). In Massachusetts, that movement is emerging with the creation of the Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education

Assessment ([MCIEA](#)), a consortium of six school districts and their local teacher unions supported by the Center for Collaborative Education ([CCE](#)). MCIEA has committed to designing a new accountability system with the goal of pushing state-level policy change. The consortium proposes a move away from one high-stakes standardized test toward a more robust system of multiple school quality measures, with performance assessment as the predominant means to assess student learning.

Growing a New Path Forward from the Ground Up

MCIEA represents a grassroots and grasstops (i.e., educators on the ground) movement to reshape education accountability. What does it look like at the assessment level?

At West Somerville Neighborhood School in Somerville, MA, a small urban district outside of Boston, 7th grade social studies teacher Marisa Roque created and implemented a humanities performance assessment that covered multiple ELA state standards along with 21st century skills. Students researched the advances South Africans have made toward equity using textbooks, the internet, and charts and graphs. They wrote a script for a podcast that clearly cited their research and presented original proposals for steps an international aid organization and the South African government could take to advance equity, based on their knowledge of how change happens. Students recorded, edited, and published their podcasts using Google Chromebooks and tools. As Marisa noted, “In designing this assessment, I thought about my friends who work for NGOs or other aid organizations and how they use their understanding of geography to create products that will serve a function. Rather than regurgitating knowledge, I asked students to use what they know to solve a problem.”

At Lincoln Elementary School in Revere, MA, another small urban district, 4th grade math and science teacher Lani Gonzalez assigned her students [to design Lincoln’s new playground](#). Pairs of students measured the area and perimeter of the schoolyard in meters. They then created scaled models to map out the playground equipment they’d like to see within the confines of a set budget. Each pair presented their design and a persuasive essay at a gallery walk in the library to which families and staff were invited before voting on the design that would be the best fit for Lincoln School. A 3-D model of the winning design was then built in art class. The project assessed students in math, science, and writing, while introducing them to real-world project management skills. Lani noted, “Students are far more engaged . . . It was cool to see that they were taking ownership of their learning and demonstrating what

they know without actually thinking of it as a test.”

This is the type of learning that state and local accountability systems should aspire to promote and nurture. And it won’t happen without a burgeoning movement from the field to place pressure upon local, state, and federal policymakers. We as educators, along with parents and students, need to:

- Learn more about alternative accountability systems, including New Hampshire’s [Performance Assessment for Competency Education](#), [New York Performance Standards Consortium](#), California Office to Reform Education ([CORE](#)), and [MCIEA](#)
- Let your state legislators and education agency know you want the state to move toward a more authentic form of accountability for assessing student learning and school quality
- Organize a consortium of districts to create a new accountability system based on multiple measures of school quality and student learning
- Advocate for your local school to adopt teacher-generated performance assessments as the primary way of assessing student learning

It is up to us to create that movement.

To learn more about MCIEA’s school quality measures and hear from more MCIEA teachers, read the consortium’s latest white paper, [Beyond Standardized Tests: A New Vision for Assessing Student Learning and School Quality](#) .

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