"These are Facts":
Opportunities for and Barriers to
Policy Changes that Support Learning

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Abstract: Barriers to high quality learning experiences are often indirectly attributed to policy, such as mandated testing, yet learning scientists seldom engage the policy arena. This study presents early-stage design-based implementation research that aims to change policy. Interactions between legislators and a collaboratory constituted to investigate performance assessments are analyzed to better understand barriers and opportunities. We found differences along party lines that can be interpreted as barriers and constraints, suggesting directions for our ongoing work.

Issues Addressed

Nationwide, in the United States, students take tests that are used to evaluate student progress, teacher effectiveness, and school quality; many test results are not useful in making instructional decisions and are controversial markers of learning and teacher effectiveness. To address this issue, a group of education leaders, teachers and university faculty formed a collaboratory. This group took their mission, vision, and research to the legislative education study committee (LESC) in hopes of launching policy change regarding opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery. Legislative perceptions of assessment practices and opportunities for learning are important to understand in order to make policy reform that creates opportunities for learning.

Significance

Assessments currently measure basic skills and knowledge and tend to broaden and shallow the curriculum. These tests foster methods of instruction that make schools "a lousy place to learn anything in" (Becker, 1972). Prior work raised concerns about over-reliance on traditional forms of assessment because they can misrepresent what students know (Phillips, Gawel, Svihla, Brown, Vye, & Bransford, 2009). Further, such methods have not been successful at narrowing achievement gaps or improving students' opportunities to learn. Efforts to reform curriculum and instruction have been obstructed by the specter of high stakes testing. Performance assessments (PAs) allow students to demonstrate the complex practices and integrated understanding called for in new standards, such as Common Core. However, there are numerous barriers to adopting PAs in place of traditional assessment; this study sought to surface barriers and opportunities in the perceptions of legislative education committee members in relation to PAs.

Methodological Approach

We report initial-phase design-based implementation research (Fishman, Penuel, Allen, Cheng, & Sabelli, 2013). Detailed field notes were collected to document the interactions between the LESC and members of the collaboratory who had been invited to present. The notes were analyzed using open coding with attention to opportunities for and barriers to policy change aimed to support assessment practices that create opportunities for learning. Once opportunities and barriers were identified, we looked for patterns within those categories.

Findings, Conclusions, and Implications

The legislators raised questions and concerns about current and proposed assessment practices. They talked about teachers and classrooms they have known personally or have heard of, but few claimed expertise in education. They told stories to warrant some of their claims. But the personal stories may also limit legislators from being able understand perspectives beyond their personal experiences. Urban and suburban democrats brought concerns about how much they perceive that teachers teach to the test. This represents an opportunity for policy change, but is hardly a novel notion. We see other opportunities in the urban Democrats' calls for reform of assessment, as well as the cross party laments about students' lack of critical thinking skills (Table 1). Several LESC members who were past or current educators offered support for PAs. Barriers were also visible in the concerns raised, predominantly from Republicans. A rural/urban Republican who is a retired educator expressed concerns about teachers' capabilities. Her lack of faith in the competency of teachers indicates a serious barrier to the potential for change in assessment policy.

Table 1: Sample of codes identified, examples, and the political party affiliations of speakers

Description of code	Examples	Party & Setting
Opportunity: A need for reform of assessment	How long will we wait for assessment reform? Standardized tests might give a nice measurement, but the question is, what are they measuring?	Urban Democrats
Opportunity: Critical thinking identified as gap in student ability	Students do not have critical thinking skills at the core level, and they are not reading Universally we [the USA] are considered to not be teaching our students critical thinking and it can be traced back to NCLB	Rural/Urban Republican, Suburban Democrat
Barrier: Mistrust in teacher competency	Some teachers do not have the basic skills. They don't have basic grammar skills and they are not prepared. These are the facts. Who will deliver these assessments if not all teachers are ready to be teachers?	Rural/Urban Republican

As we continue to seek change in assessment policy, we will attend to the opportunities and barriers made visible in these interactions. It is clear, for instance, that demonstrating teacher impact and professionalism will be vital; we will be able to show this through the designs teachers create for PAs, the feedback that they give on drafts of student work as part of the PAs, and their engagement in a professional network to score PAs from other teachers' classrooms.

References

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