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In Case You Missed It...

On October 20, 2008, the Forum for Education and Democracy, in partnership with the offices of Senator **Russell Feingold** (D-WI) and Congressman **John Yarmuth** (D-KY), hosted a Capitol Hill briefing about performance-based assessment, in order to explore how this innovation in “smarter testing” can improve the conditions for higher-quality teaching and learning in our nation’s schools.

Stanford Professor (and Forum Convener) **Linda Darling-Hammond**, Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards and Student Testing (CRESST) Director **Eva Baker**, Urban Academy co-director **Ann Cook**, former Urban Academy student **Kiri Davis**, and Nellie Mae Foundation CEO **Nicholas Donohue** shared a number of key insights and policy implications.

Key Insights:

- National and international expectations for learning have changed. To meet the demands of the modern world, students must become more reflective, adaptive, innovative, and analytical. Our current emphasis on high-stakes, multiple-choice testing does not generate these sorts of skills in young people, nor does it encourage teachers to teach in ways that help foster the development of these skills.
- The United States cannot tolerate accountability systems that do not push our students to demonstrate the types of skills needed for our society to remain competitive in the global economy.
- To implement a system that supports performance-based assessments, schools should have several components in place, such as: opportunities for active learning; formative and summative documentation; strategies for corrective action; multiple ways for students to express and exhibit their learning; graduation level performance-based tasks aligned with learning standards; external evaluators of student work; and a focus on professional development.
- Schools participating in New York City’s Performance Standards Consortium have a significantly lower dropout problem than other city schools — just 8%, as opposed to the citywide average of 20%. These schools also boast a higher college attendance rate (88% v. 70%) and a higher persistence rate into the sophomore year of college (84% v. 73%) despite enrolling more disadvantaged students.
- While high quality assessment requires investments in teacher development and the development and scoring of performance tasks, this investment strengthens teachers’ understanding of standards and how to meet them, while setting more challenging expectations for what students should be able to do with what they learn. Thus, these investments not only provide information about student achievement; they also improve teaching quality and student learning.

What Are Performance Assessments?

Performance assessments are tools that allow teachers to gather information about what students can actually do with what they are learning — science experiments that students design, carry out, analyze, and summarize; computer programs that students create, test and refine; persuasive essays that students write; research inquiries they pursue, seeking and assembling evidence about a question, and presenting it in written and oral form. Whether the skill or standard being measured is writing, speaking, mathematical literacy, or research, students actually perform tasks involving these skills while the teacher observes, gathers information about, then scores the performance based upon a set of pre-determined criteria.

These assessments typically consist of three parts; a task, a scoring guide or rubric, and a set of administration guidelines. The development, administration, and scoring of these tasks requires teacher development to insure quality and consistency. Research suggests that such assessments are better tools for showing the extent to which students have developed higher order thinking skills, such as the abilities to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information. They lead to more student engagement in learning and stronger performance on the kinds of authentic tasks that better resemble what they will need to do in the world outside of school. They also provide richer feedback to teachers, leading to improved learning outcomes for students.

Policy Implications:

Several policy changes at the national, state and local levels can create a more favorable climate for states and districts that wish to implement performance-based assessment (PBA) systems:

- 1. Invest heavily in teacher development.** Educators need opportunities to learn to build, use, and score assessments that will inform and guide their teaching. They can acquire this knowledge with purposeful professional development that engages them in analyzing student work, developing and scoring performance tasks around standards, and debriefing with colleagues about how best to incorporate both the assessments and the feedback to students. To develop these skills, educators will need common planning and learning time to practice looking at student work, to evaluate carefully the cognitive components of that work, and to change their instructional strategies in response to diverse learners' performance and needs. Finally, there are opportunities for professional learning within the peer review, audit, or moderation systems that states or districts construct to check on PBA consistency and provide feedback, as teachers discuss scoring together, compare and re-score tasks, and calibrate individual judgments against group standards.
- 2. Support capacity building at state education departments and among consortia of states.** State and district leaders will need to become skilled in developing and managing performance assessment systems, and bringing together resources for strong implementation of both state and local components. Schools and districts need support from the states for large-scale efforts such as curriculum mapping, peer review, audit, or moderation systems, and for organizing uniform teacher training systems. Since only classroom teachers can directly impact instruction and learning, a major task of legislators and personnel in departments of education will be to provide assistance to the educators who must make the system work. For instance, local educators will likely need support in aligning school-based assessments to state standards and combining local assessments with statewide measures. Another key element is technical support for this critical work in the form of experts embedded locally who can help guide these activities. Efforts such as the New England Collaborative Assessment Program show that states can overcome capacity challenges and achieve savings by working together on assessments.
- 3. Repurpose resources.** Although some methods of managing performance assessments can cost more than machine scoring of multiple choice tests (i.e., when such assessments are treated as traditional external tests and shipped out to separately paid scorers), the cost calculus changes when assessment is understood as part of teachers' work and learning — and built into teaching and professional development time.

Much evidence suggests that developing and scoring these assessments is a high-yield investment in teacher learning and a good use of professional development resources. In systems that involve teachers in developing and scoring assessments, some of the funds otherwise used for outside contractors are instead spent on teachers' professional learning about assessment and on moderated scoring of tasks that raise the standard for learning and enable teachers to become more skillful in their practice. This use of resources can be more cost effective in improving teaching and learning than external testing alone.

- 4. Invest in research and development.** Bringing educators to the table to help map curricular content and priorities can help them better focus and tailor their instruction. Policymakers should also work to improve standardized assessments at the federal, state, and local levels so that they better represent and measure students' abilities to reason, present, and defend their ideas, as well as to demonstrate their skills in authentic ways. Perhaps most important, we must begin to think in terms of performance assessment systems, as do the highest achieving nations and states. To support much improved educational outcomes, we will need systems in which standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment are tightly intertwined, supporting and measuring high-quality learning in classrooms where students have many opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills on standards-based tasks, and teachers have myriad opportunities to learn how to teach them well.
- 5. Focus accountability systems on 21st Century skills.** Shifting the focus of assessments — from measuring recall to measuring students' abilities to demonstrate skills authentically — will result in new metrics of school performance. Changing what counts as assessment evidence, decreasing standardized testing requirements, and modifying the federal accountability structure could help contribute toward school improvement. Currently, it is difficult to convince districts that fear sanctions to risk focusing on higher-order thinking skills or investing in assessment innovation. Both the scores that result from assessments and the finer-grained information about how exactly students reason, think, and perform should be fed back to schools in ways that further both student learning and curricular innovation. All of these uses of assessment should lead to additional learning supports for students and teachers, rather than punishments that shut down inquiry and growth.

Join us for our next Capitol Hill Briefing, in early 2009, when the subject turns to teaching and learning. To add your name to our mailing list, visit www.forumforeducation.org.