

Reimagining New York's assessment strategy

I have written previously in this space about the need to reimagine what is possible for New York's students. I have argued that many of our longstanding educational policies and practices have not proven successful for all students. I have also explained my sincere belief that all New York State students should have access to the process, opportunities and resources they need for school success; districts and schools must work to remove the predictability of students' success or failure based on race, gender, socio-economic status, language spoken, sexual orientation, zip code or social and cultural factors.

Additionally, I believe that, as New Yorkers, we share a common goal: ensuring that all students graduate from high school with meaningful academic and career options. Achieving this goal requires significant effort. For example, it requires all of us to evaluate our work through the lens of diversity, equity and inclusion. Research shows that successful DEI policies can lead to improved student achievement, which in turn can lead to better outcomes in other areas of their lives, including work, civic engagement and higher education.

Ensuring that our students graduate with genuine opportunities for success in life also requires that we recommit to foundational ideals and values of public education; make significant and sustained investments in teaching and learning; close the digital divide; better connect schools to their local communities; drive targeted resources to students with the greatest needs; and enhance professional capacity.

It also requires that we consider new possibilities for all students and apply everything we know about the science of learning and the art of teaching. Fortunately, we know much more about these things than we used to. For example, the research tells us that we must provide all students with more meaningful and deeper learning opportunities.

A recent report by the National Academy of Education called "Educating for civic reasoning and discourse" concluded that all students require a solid grounding in academic content and skills from across the traditional subject areas, including an understanding of how abstract concepts and modes of reasoning relate to real-world public problems. The report further states that all students must develop a number of key intellectual dispositions and habits of mind, including an eagerness to engage with complex ideas, assess the credibility of evidence, explore multiple points of view, sift through moral and ethical dilemmas, empathize with people from differing backgrounds, and appreciate the power of literature and the arts to teach about others' experiences and worldviews.

To meet the demands of a new possible for all students, our assessment strategy must:

- Provide them with rigorous and multiple ways to demonstrate that

they are learning and developing new knowledge, skills and dispositions throughout the entire learning process.

- Communicate evidence about the learning process (accountability).
- Provide feedback about learning and teaching to students, teachers and families.

Logic dictates that a single examination, administered by pencil and paper on a single day, simply cannot capture the kinds of deeper and more meaningful learning that we are seeking to provide all students. If we want our public school system to provide rigorous and comprehensive opportunities for all children, then we will have to ensure that the entire process of schooling is anchored in the current knowledge base of learning and development.

It is therefore exceptionally good news that the State Education Department has received a \$500,000 grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York that will enable us to study existing assessment strategies that have been shown to help students in significant ways.

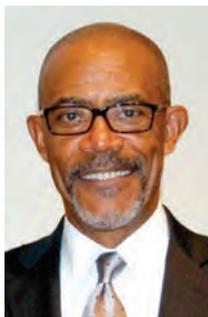
Specifically, the grant will fund a six-year statewide pilot project to explore the potential to reimagine New York's assessment system in a way that fosters high-quality instructional opportunities, provides authentic measures of deeper learning, and better prepares students for college and the workplace. Information about the grant is available at bit.ly/3K6gOQa.

Because New York's state assessments are primarily paper-and-pencil based and traditional in design, they tend to incentivize a "seat-time" model of instruction and are not, in and of themselves, reliable predictors of postsecondary success.

By contrast, "performance assessments" ask students to demonstrate what they know and understand by creating a product or planning and conducting a performance. In addition to more authentically measuring what students know and can do, performance assessments build cultures of inquiry and accountability for students and educators; enable rich, culturally responsive education to flourish; provide unlimited learning opportunities for students; and signal the types of instructional tasks many would like to see in classrooms.

Here are three examples of highly promising school models, currently in practice, that use performance-based assessments to great effect:

1. The International Baccalaureate (IB). The IB program uses an inquiry-based pedagogical approach and assessments that measure students' individual performances on specified objectives.



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2. Career and Technical Education (CTE). High quality CTE opportunities have taken their rightful place alongside traditional academic areas as part of a well-rounded education. Students in CTE programs learn rigorous academic and technical skills; they graduate prepared for the high-skill, high-wage, high-demand occupations of the 21st century global economy.

(3) The New York Performance Standards Consortium. The Consortium employs a system of practitioner developed, student-focused, and externally reviewed projects, papers, performances, experiments, and experiences. A recently concluded longitudinal study conducted by Professor Michelle Fine found that, "preliminary ... evidence demonstrates that students in Consortium schools begin high school more educationally and economically disadvantaged than their peers and yet are more likely to graduate from high school, attend college, and persist in college than demographically similar peers." See bit.ly/3sulWa3.

The Carnegie Foundation grant will enable us to explore whether these

successful strategies could serve as models for reimagining New York's diploma requirements in ways that increase high school graduation rates while also better preparing all students for success in college and the global economy. We will do this through a pilot program in approximately 10 sites throughout the state. Participating schools will work together in networks to learn from one another and from partner schools that are already successfully implementing performance-based assessments. Details of the pilot programs will be announced shortly. As always, I know that we can count on NYSSBA and its member school boards to assist in these pilots.

One final, important note. Neither the Board of Regents nor the State Education Department are suggesting that state assessments should be eliminated. But critics surely will present it that way; they will claim that the Regents seek to "lower standards" to get more students to graduate.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The simple truth is that educational research and simple fairness compel us to consider new options to reimagine our current assessment strategy. These options will enable us to more accurately determine whether students are on a pathway to success – and to provide all of them with the support they need to get there.

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