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**Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education
Assessments: Creating a Grassroots Accountability System to
Leverage State Policy Change**

Dan French

Center for Collaborative Education
United States

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Abstract: Standardized testing remains the predominant proficiency measure for students and schools, placing teacher and student focus on test-prep and lower order skills while maintaining achievement gaps that penalize underserved students. The Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Assessment seeks to close this gap and change assessment measures on a state level by training teachers to become leaders in implementing student-centered performance assessments and encouraging state legislators to consider alternative, forward-thinking accountability systems.

Keywords: Achievement; Standards; Accountability; Assessment; Equal Education; Outcomes Measurement; Public Schools; Teacher Education

Consortio de Massachusetts para evaluaciones educativas innovadoras: Creando un sistema de responsabilidad de base para influenciar el cambio de política estatal

Resumen: Las pruebas estandarizadas continúan siendo la medida de competencia predominante para los estudiantes y las escuelas, colocando al docente y a los estudiantes enfocados en las habilidades de preparación de exámenes y de orden inferior mientras se mantienen las brechas de rendimiento que penalizan a los estudiantes desatendidos. El Consorcio de Massachusetts para Evaluación Innovadora busca cerrar esta brecha y cambiar las medidas de evaluación a nivel estatal capacitando a los maestros para que se conviertan en líderes en la implementación de evaluaciones de desempeño centradas en el estudiante y alentando a los legisladores estatales para que consideren sistemas alternativos de responsabilidad con visión de futuro.

Palabras clave: Rendimiento; estándares; responsabilidad; evaluación; medida de resultados; escuelas públicas; educación de profesores

Consórcio de Massachusetts para avaliações educacionais inovadoras: Criando um sistema de responsabilidade de base para influenciar a mudança de política estadual

Resumo: Os testes padronizados continuam a ser a medida predominante de competência para estudantes e escolas, colocando os professores e os alunos focados na preparação de testes e nas habilidades de menor ordem, mantendo as lacunas de desempenho que penalizam os estudantes desatendidos. O Consórcio de Massachusetts para avaliação inovadora do Massachusetts procura reduzir esta lacuna e alterar as medidas de avaliação no nível estadual, capacitando professores para se tornarem líderes na implementação de avaliações de desempenho centradas no aluno e incentivando os legisladores estaduais a considerar sistemas de responsabilidade alternativa com uma visão do futuro.

Palavras-chave: Desempenho; padrões; responsabilidade; avaliação; medição de resultados; escolas públicas; educação de professores

Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessments: Creating a Grassroots Accountability System to Leverage State Policy Change

We are in need of dramatic change to our state education accountability systems. While the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and standardized testing did shine a spotlight on achievement disparities by subgroup, this form of testing has done more harm than good through narrowing the curriculum, placing an undue focus on test-prep and lower order thinking skills, and labeling and penalizing schools that serve high percentages of historically underserved students who score poorly on standardized tests (Mickelson et al, 2015). Most importantly, standardized testing as the predominant and often sole measure in making student and school proficiency determinations has failed to close this nation's stubborn achievement gap by race and income (Hanushek, 2016; Reardon, 2011). This latter point is especially salient at a time when our student enrollment today represents a greater percentage of low-income students, English learners, immigrants, and students of color than any time in past decades (NCES, 2017; SEC, 2015).

Simultaneously, there is an increased understanding of the growing importance of the acquisition of higher order thinking skills and dispositions to better prepare students for multiple future opportunities in college and career, while preparing them to contribute in creating a just and equitable world. This set of skills and dispositions cannot be well assessed within a standardized test (Conley et al, 2009).

With the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states now have the opportunity to add in additional outcome measures of student and school progress; yet standardized tests still are required to be the majority factor in determining student proficiency and school quality. A limited number of states, however, can be federally approved to replace state standardized tests for locally designed assessment systems. Within this new policy climate, there is growing interest within states in the potential of performance assessments as a more effective measure to assess student proficiency (Stosich, Snyder, & Wilczak, 2018).

This growing interest is supported by research studies that have found that implementation of performance assessments can improve classroom instruction and student outcomes. Darling-Hammond & Rustique-Forrester (2005) found that use of performance assessments improved teacher instruction due to embedding assessment into the curriculum, the immediate availability of results, and the authenticity of the tasks. Additionally, through sharing assignments and scoring student work together, teachers have the opportunity to develop more collaborative practices. Teachers can uniformly increase their expectations for the quality of student work because they now have common agreement on performance levels (Darling-Hammond & Wood, 2008). A study of seven performance assessment scale-up efforts found that performance assessments provide more opportunities for students to demonstrate their knowledge and complex skills, and offer teachers better information about student progress (Tung & Stasesky, 2010).

Stosich, Snyder, and Wilczak (2018) analyzed the policy and capacity building efforts of 12 states to elevate the role of performance assessments in measuring student learning, and identified four common strategies: Supporting classroom-based performance assessments; Using “capstone” performance assessments as a high school graduation requirement; Using performance assessments for school accountability requirements including in non-tested subjects; Applying for federal waivers to allow locally-generated performance assessments to replace federal testing requirements within state accountability systems.

However, in some cases state departments of education are not well positioned or prepared to lead the charge toward new accountability systems that embrace performance assessments over standardized tests. What, then, can teachers, school leaders, and superintendents eager to embrace new models of accountability do? In many states, we will need grassroots and grasstops (including professionals who can raise public awareness and influence decision makers) movements to push for state-level reform in accountability systems. One example of an initiative that seeks to adopt most of the strategies articulated by Stosich et al is the Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment (MCIEA).

Massachusetts is considered a national leader in education, and is a top performer on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests. The state has been a strong proponent of using high stakes standardized tests as a means to drive student achievement. Yet, despite Massachusetts' aggregate educational successes, the state has some of the highest income, race, and language achievement gaps in the nation (French & Lebeaux, 2016). At a time when the state's student body is growing ever more diverse, there is greater urgency to adopt an accountability system that better meets all students' needs.

It is with this backdrop that MCIEA formed in 2016 as a partnership of six Massachusetts public school districts and their local teacher unions representing almost 90,000 students (making up nearly 10% of the state's students), 183 schools, and 6,600 teachers. A unique consortium aspect is that the governing board is made up of the superintendents and local teacher union presidents of member districts. The Center for Collaborative Education (CCE) and College of the Holy Cross (CHC) provide facilitation, coordination, and technical support.

MCIEA believes there are richer means of assessing student and school progress than a single high stakes standardized test. Learning from past and present performance assessment and school quality initiatives such as the New York Performance Standards Consortium, New Hampshire's Performance Assessment for Competency Education, and California's CORE districts, the consortium is building an assessment system that recognizes the multi-dimensionality of schools and will result in high-quality information that does not merely reflect student demography. By achieving this goal, MCIEA seeks to increase achievement for all students, close achievement gaps among subgroups, and prepare all students for college, career, and life.

Through focus groups of students, parents, educators, and community members in each district, and combined with polling data and research, the consortium identified five categories of school quality that are most important for constituencies to know—Teachers and the Teaching Environment, School Culture, Resources, Indicators of Academic Learning, and Citizenship & Wellbeing—and over 30 unique data measures. The consortium has constructed a multiple measures school quality data dashboard that provides easy access to all constituencies to track the progress of schools, both in the aggregate and by subgroups.

For the Indicators of Academic Learning, the consortium emphasizes the primacy of teacher-generated, curriculum-embedded performance assessments for determining student proficiency, with the belief that performance assessments engage and assess students in meaningful, complex learning in which they apply new knowledge and skills to real-world situations. Thus, the consortium is developing the capacity of districts, schools, and teachers to create high quality classroom-based performance assessments, to use performance assessments for school accountability requirements in multiple disciplines, and eventually to gain federal approval to enable its performance assessment system to replace federal testing requirements.

The consortium aims to have teachers become the experts and leaders in creating high quality performance assessments through their Quality Performance Assessment institute, a year-long institute that engages educators in a performance assessment design cycle. Educators within the consortium construct curriculum-embedded performance tasks with school-based teams and use protocols to assess the quality of draft tasks (e.g., alignment, fairness, Universal Design, engagement) and make task revisions, field test the tasks, and learn how to score student work reliably in order to make consistent proficiency determinations. Each lead team is then empowered and supported, with assistance from CCE staff, to build performance assessment literacy for the entire faculty. With teacher capacity to create high quality performance assessments increasing, the consortium will be field-testing the creation of cross-district performance tasks that are broad enough to be contextualized within local curriculum. The goal is to build a system in which student work from multiple performance assessments are used to make proficiency determinations of students across major academic disciplines. This process results in raising teachers' quality of instruction, as noted by a consortium teacher:

Teams have really bought into the process and started to use the tools to analyze their assessments and student work to reflect back to the assessment task and then rubric and did we truly assess what we meant to assess. [We] went through the [calibration protocol the] first time and realized, "Wait a minute, that's not really what we were wanting to assess, but that's what the students perceived. How do we then get to where we want to be with this assessment?" So it has been a great feedback tool.

In increasing local capacity to create high quality performance assessments, CCE and the consortium pay attention to three elements critical to scaling up and sustaining performance assessment

systems—technical quality, robust and ongoing teacher professional development, and leadership and policy support (Tung & Staszky, 2010). In addition to the intensive and ongoing professional development provided to lead teacher teams, the National Center for Improvement of Educational Assessment will assist the consortium to ensure that the eventual performance assessment system meets standards of technical quality. MCIEA intends to use this model to encourage state policy makers to embrace a performance assessment system in place of the current standardized tests and/or press the state to apply for federal approval for consortium districts to forego the state accountability model and adopt their own. With this in mind, MCIEA will only be successful if they can convince parents, educators, and, most importantly, policymakers that it is time for a new future-minded accountability system.

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About the Author

Dan French

Center for Collaborative Education

dfrench@ccebos.org

Dan French is Executive Director of the Center for Collaborative Education and leads all of CCE's initiatives. He works with the board of directors to lead the strategic development of the organization and has secured grants from over 30 foundations and the U.S. Department of Education. He assisted the Boston Public Schools to expand the Pilot model, launched the New England Small Schools Network, and created the National Turning Points Network. Dan is a member of the Massachusetts Citizens for Public Schools Board of Directors and has authored numerous publications, including Boston's Pilot Schools: An Alternative to Charter Schools. He is the former Director of Instruction and Curriculum for the Massachusetts Department of Education and special educator at the Charles River Academy. Dan earned an M.Ed. in Urban Education from Antioch University and an Ed.D. in Urban Education from University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

About the Guest Editors

Elizabeth Leisy Stosich

Fordham University

estosich@fordham.edu

Elizabeth Leisy Stosich is an Assistant Professor in Educational Leadership, Administration, and Policy at Fordham University. Previously, she was a Research and Policy Fellow at the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education. Her research interests include education policy, assessment and accountability, school and district leadership, school improvement, and teachers' professional learning.

Soung Bae

Stanford University

soungb@stanford.edu

Soung Bae is a Senior Learning Specialist and UDL Innovation Studio Manager at the Schwab Learning Center at Stanford University. Formerly, she was a Senior Research and Policy Analyst at the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education. Her research interests focus on school accountability, student engagement, and designing learning environments that appreciate and support learner variability.

Jon Snyder

Stanford University

jdsnyder@stanford.edu

Jon Snyder is the Executive Director of the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE). His research interests include teacher learning, conditions that support teacher learning, and the relationships between teacher and student learning.

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