

## OVERVIEW

### A Fresh Focus for Curriculum

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**H**ampered by budget cuts and the cautiousness that accompanies hard times, American educators are nonetheless trying to redesign schools to match changing world conditions. An essential element of that change is the way we assess student learning.

For at least 20 years, standardized tests have been accepted as the measure of achievement. Now, although the tests remain firmly established, influential decision makers, including well-informed politicians, are beginning to recognize their inadequacies. How useful for accountability purposes are data from norm-referenced multiple-choice tests when the tests compare students to one another rather than to established standards, and when they emphasize skills out of context rather than thoughtful application?

Educators who have long protested the misuse of standardized tests must concede that most of the tests students take are devised by teachers, and that some of those are even worse than the published ones. The answer to both problems, it seems, is a fresh approach, one that downplays conventional psychometrics in favor of real performance. If we want students to be able to write a persuasive letter to the editor of the local paper, ask them to write such a letter. If they need to be able to conduct a scientific experiment, have them conduct one.

That sounds obvious, but the face validity of performance assessment is misleading. As Richard Shavelson (p. 20) and his colleagues found when they asked California 5th and 6th graders to do simple science experiments, the same students perform differently on different tasks—and even on different forms of the same task.

And what about comparability of scores? Anyone who has graded stacks of student papers knows how difficult it is to maintain absolute, rather than relative, standards. After reading five or six poor papers, even a mediocre one looks pretty good.

Equally difficult is using evaluation criteria consistently. One student's letter is sprawling but convincing in its frankness; another's is technically correct but arid.

Educators in other countries contend with such problems by "moderating" their exams (teachers read and discuss questions and selected student papers from other teachers). In the United States, teachers of English have learned a lot about uniform scoring from 20 years of experience assessing writing. Mainly they have learned that teacher judgment, an essential element, must be informed by continuing interaction with colleagues and regular exposure to models of desired performance. If that is essential for evaluation of writing, a familiar school task, it is even more necessary for judging students' performance on complex tasks that simulate the world outside school, especially if the ratings are to have a major impact on students' futures.

These cautions, and others identified by Joan Herman (p. 74) in her synthesis of research, must not keep us from moving ahead. We can learn how to cope with them from leaders like Grant Wiggins (p. 26) and from pioneering practitioners who are finding ways to reshape both assessment and curriculum to give students both opportunities to show what they can do and a better sense of purpose for doing it.

For these educators, performance assessment is part of a broader vision often referred to as Outcome-Based Education. For example, the Aurora, Colorado, schools have defined five major outcomes intended to drive the educational program for all students. As Aurora educators have begun to focus curriculum and instruction to ensure that all students achieve the outcomes, they have developed criteria and scoring rubrics by which to refocus assessment as well. High school curriculum coordinator Nora Redding (p. 49) believes the results will be "graduates equipped to meet the complex problems of the 21st century." □

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