Using Performance-Based Student Assessments

Assessment and Accountability Comprehensive Center

Performance-based student assessments play a powerful role in validating and monitoring the growth of all students and the success of curriculum and instructional programs. This importance increases in the context of persistently low-achieving schools, in which student growth can be fostered by learning experiences and performance opportunities that invite students to show what they can do with what they are learning. This strategy is not only sound pedagogically, but highly motivating and empowering for students. Such assignments, accompanied by appropriate instructional support, challenge each student to do or create something of value to themselves and others and to take the next step forward in their academic growth.

Performance-based assessments provide key opportunities for students to engage in tasks like those they will be asked to do in higher education and careers. Such tasks often take extended time and concentrated effort, and may call on students to plan, work cooperatively, and communicate results in a variety of formats. Performance tasks and assessments can be designed to call on students to display higher-order thinking skills and to integrate knowledge, skills, and conceptual understanding to successfully complete the assignment. The "doing" implicit in such tasks allows the assessment of a student's developing cognitive and behavioral capacities for successful achievement.

High quality performance-based student assignments and assessments have the power to

- integrate students' knowledge, skills, conceptual understanding, and performance capacities;

- allow students to monitor their own growth and apply clear performance standards to their work; and

- motivate students to set challenging learning goals meaningful to themselves, to strive for excellence, and to celebrate growth and achievement along the way.

Performance-based assignments and assessments can, in the context of project-based learning, become the ongoing central activities and assignments of the instructional program. Such rich and powerful assignments can provide an integrating context for knowledge and skills acquisition, accelerating learning in these specific areas as well.

Performance-based student assessments take more time to administer, often are tied directly to specific curriculum and instructional programs or particular assignments, and take more time for scoring, reporting back the results, and putting the results to effective use with students than do standardized tests.

The assessment challenge, at both the district and school levels, is to develop the capacity of classroom teachers to evaluate student work in shared and common ways, often using established rubrics or scoring criteria to evaluate student products and performances. The results are often complex and nuanced; the student work on such tasks is typically neither right nor wrong, but rather, combines a variety of strengths and areas needing improvement. Such evaluations can inform summative judgments, but, most fruitfully, they provide formative instructional guidance, challenging teachers to use the results to help students take the next steps towards excellence.

Action Principles

The fundamental action principle for states, districts, and schools is to integrate performance-based assessments and their results into their local and classroom assignments and assessments as a core part of instructional systems.

For State

1. Encourage the use of multiple measures, including performance-based assessments, in district and classroom assessment and accountability systems.

2. Provide professional development on the use of performance-based assessments locally to improve the alignment of student activities and assignments to the statewide standards and to monitor student growth.

3. Provide professional development to assist districts and schools to develop professional learning communities that address performance-based assignments and assessments.

4. Selectively employ powerful performance-based assessments in statewide assessments in language arts, science, mathematics, and social science.

For District

1. Ensure that all students have access to rigorous, standards-based instructional programs that address higher-order thinking skills and integrated performance.

2. Ensure that student assignments and assessments employ performance-based assessments among the multiple measures used to monitor student growth.

3. Provide professional development that teachers need to develop, evaluate, and learn from performance-based assessments.

4. Monitor the implementation of instructional programs incorporating standards-aligned, performance-based assignments and assessments.

5. Monitor individual student growth with common local assessments employing multiple measures (including performance-based assessments used formatively).

For School

1. Engage in professional collaboration about identifying and/or developing performance-based assessments, scoring them consistently, and using the results to improve instruction and monitor student growth.

2. Identify and commit to the school-wide use of performance-based assignments and assessments throughout the curriculum and throughout the school year.

3. Identify the methods and criteria for monitoring the success of this strategy.

4. Clearly and visibly communicate within the school community the achievement of students on performance-based assignments and assessments.

References and Resources

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