

HORACE

How the National Standards Debate Affects the Essential School

Everyone agrees we need high standards for school improvement. But who should set them, and how? How will we tell if schools are meeting them? What part can Essential schools play in this crucial public debate?

GOING TO SCHOOL AND TAKING tests has lots in common with an airline pilot's job, Harvard education professor Dick Elmore has observed: "long periods of excruciating boredom punctuated by intervals of stark terror." Essential school teachers have been working for years to dispel the "excruciating boredom" by engaging students actively in meaningful work, and to replace the "stark terror" of periodic or irrelevant testing with authentic exhibitions of mastery.

But as Coalition member schools try to make assessment integral to every classroom action, policy efforts to create and enforce higher standards in education are going on in their state capitals, in the U.S. Congress and Cabinet, and in the meeting rooms of professional and scholarly organizations. How will this often confusing array of activity affect the daily routines of schooling? What can Essential schools do to understand and influence the policies that may shape their future?

Beginning in the Bush Administration and now continuing under President Clinton, state and federal policymakers alarmed by U.S. students' poor standing against their global competitors have pushed for new accountability measures. The 1989 "education summit" in Charlottesville, Virginia gathered 50 governors who agreed on broad goals for school improvement by the year 2000, and a number of states launched ambitious restructuring

efforts in its wake. Now an Administration peopled by former governors—from Bill Clinton to Education Secretary Richard W. Riley and Riley's deputy, Madeline Kunin—is following hard upon state heels with a plan to define national standards and goals, measure progress toward them, and reward those states that align their policies with them.

Known as the "Goals 2000: Educate America Act," the current bill creates a structure in which the federal government authorizes major disciplinary groups to articulate content standards in their fields for a National Education Standards and Improvement Council. It urges states and districts voluntarily to develop their own student performance standards and assessments—and later, standards governing "opportunity to learn"—which that Council would approve and certify. And it supplies an unspecified amount of money to support state and local school reform efforts.

Goals 2000 will most likely not withhold other federal educational funds (which fuel much of state education departments' budgets) if states choose not to go along. But its national education goals gain muscle indirectly as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (E.S.E.A.) comes simultaneously before Congress for reauthorization, linking distribution of Chapter 1 funds to whether states have aligned their standards for all students with the goals.

Clarifying a School's Aims and Standards: An Interactive Exercise

California's Center for School Restructuring is working on an "accountability, learning, and support" system to help the state's demonstration schools that have received special funding for restructuring. The long-range goals of the demonstration schools and districts are to "provide powerful learning outcomes for all students" and to invent "an authentic system of accountability." To help schools give an honest accounting of their restructuring work, the Center has devised a "School Change Portfolio" that would contain documents, artifacts, student and adult work, videotapes, and other materials that represent changes in student learning.

The first step in the process, California education officials say, is for schools to "translate their vision of successful students into measurable, holistic outcomes which capture what matters most—what knowledge, skills, capacities, habits, and attitudes ought to reside in every student as a result of their experience in public schools." These "holistic learning outcomes" then become a tool for guiding the restructuring efforts. As they follow the formal protocol for together examining their own student works, schools say, it becomes a powerful way to discover whether their restructuring innovations are having an impact on student learning.

What follows is a 50-minute exercise that takes place early in that process, in which school people begin the discussion of their school's aims and standards for student performance. It is included in the materials schools receive under the title "Assessment: The Trojan Horse of Restructuring."

Introduction (5 minutes):

Assessment specialist Grant Wiggins refers to assessment as the Trojan Horse of restructuring. Wiggins believes that assessment should be the opening gambit and driving force shaping school and district restructuring efforts. Assessment must be reconceived as not only measuring, but *evoking* quality student work. This is a major shift in the traditional role of assessment in education.

Rethinking assessment along these lines means developing clarity about aims. Clarity does not come from mission statements, but rather from elaboration of (1) the essential areas of skill, knowledge, and capacity we want from all our students; and (2) the level of performance we want at these capacities. Restructuring is simply building the school around the Trojan Horse—that is, around *essential tasks done well*.

The following interactive exercise is a *start* at building the Trojan Horse—namely, building clarity about the aims of education and the standards for student performance.

1. Individuals (5 minutes):

List three things you would like all kids to know or be able to do before leaving high school. What are the *three most crucial* skills or areas of knowledge? Write these three down.

2. Small Groups (10 minutes):

Share your three items with members of your group. Discuss, argue, and come to *consensus as a group* about three discrete skills, capacities, or areas of knowledge you all feel are crucial for all students before they leave high school.

3. Large Group (10-15 minutes):

- Elicit from the group a list (to be projected overhead or written on the board). Add only new items.
- Which of these *are* covered by current standardized tests, grades, or traditional methods of assessment? (Mark with a check.)
- Which *are not* covered by traditional assessment methods? (Mark with an arrow.)

4. Small Groups (10 minutes):

- Select from the main list *one* item that has an *arrow* by it.
- How would you convince students and adults in your community who are interested—teachers, parents, board members, business leaders, and so on—that students do in fact know and are able to do the crucial item you picked. What would students need to do to prove they have reached that capacity?

5. Table Groups (10 minutes):

Join with two other groups (three groups in all) and share the assessments you designed.

Closing (2 minutes):

The crucial *aims* of schooling—and the *performance standards* we require—must drive the design of school structures. Restructuring means designing curricula, pedagogy, and formative assessments that prepare students to meet clear and challenging exit-level requirements. Further, restructuring requires focusing decisions about deployment of resources—staff, time, student grouping patterns, budget priorities, decision-making patterns, and so forth—on creating the conditions that elicit quality student work.

accountability as a positive thing, not a big stick from the outside."

Instead of putting federal and state money into developing new tests, Sizer contends, government should help school people by exposing them to many examples of rigorous student work that could influence their own thinking—what assessment expert Grant Wiggins has called "standards without standardization." One proposed Coalition project aims to develop a national electronic communications network that would link teachers with colleagues from other schools, professional organizations, employers, higher education professionals, and outside stakeholders to share

and critique (using a specific "tuning protocol") what they are asking students to do. The Exhibitions Collection database already under way at CES would be a part of this; so would innovations like a multimedia "digital portfolio," which keeps track of student progress toward graduation requirements through not only written work but audiovisual presentations on line. (A future issue of *HORACE* will explore further the uses of technology for assessment and other Essential School purposes.)

Reorienting the conversation about rigorous standards so that its primary locus is the school and community, Sizer suggests, gives it a chance to influence the real problems

Already in the midst of substantive dialogue about their expectations and experimentation with new methods of assessment, Essential schools occupy a key position to affect the decisions being made at higher levels.

schools struggle with—too little depth in the curriculum, not enough time for meaningful learning, scarce resources to help teachers develop their craft. "The discussion can't take place in a vacuum," he says. "It will be influenced by state requirements, by subject-area people, and perhaps more than anything by the expectations of colleges." But the federal government, he believes, should play the role of persuader, not dictator. The current movement runs the risk, one recent commentator noted, of becoming a conversation among governments—another dictum from on high, complete with new curricula, new tests, new red tape, and a whole new set of hazards.

Unquestionably, Essential schools occupy a key position right now to affect the decisions being made at higher levels. Already in the midst of substantive dialogue about their expectations and experimentation with new methods of assessment, when successful they can stand as powerful examples of a different paradigm of schooling. "If there are places where local assessments can work, your chances are more than doubled to put them into place system-wide," observes Judy Bray, a systems coordinator at the Education Commission for the States. "I believe that our dedicated network of school folk can change the system if they will take a public stand, in support of or dissent to the standards under development in their own state." □

HORACE'S MAILBOX

To the Editor:

As someone working with the Coalition and with the National Network for Education Renewal (NNER), I was pleased to see your attention to the critical issue of teacher education [September 1993]. I applaud your choice of the University of Southern Maine and the University of Louisville efforts as exemplars.

While you made important points concerning the professional preparation of prospective teachers, you missed what may be the most important point of all. Teachers for Essential schools must have an initial education that is more than an apprenticeship to their craft. Perhaps the most critical element is the general education they receive—including their study of the academic disciplines they will be teaching, which develops them as educated persons. From this they need to develop the broad scope of knowledge that will let them function as generalists (as envisioned by the eighth Common Principle) rather than as the specialists found most commonly in secondary schools. They need to understand the nature of our democratic society, whether they are teaching elementary or secondary students. The nine Common Principles will not guide their work if they do not understand, for example, why the school's goals should apply to all students.

You quote Lynne Miller as saying that "Goodlad emphasizes teacher education as the lever for school renewal," while Southern Maine sees "school renewal as the lever for teacher education." More accurately, Goodlad and the NNER want to engage Arts and Sciences faculty, College of Education people, and school-based faculty simultaneously in the renewal of schools and the education of educators. All three parties are needed and the action has to go on in both school and university settings.

Unfortunately, some of the programs that emphasize the field-based portion of a teacher's education seem unable or unwilling to demand high standards for the candidate's general education. They seem to believe that if the person entering their program has a degree with an academic major, no matter how old the degree or how weak the program, they can do nothing but hope that any academic weakness will be overcome by the initiative of the candidate once hired. In order to strengthen teacher education, one has to also examine ways that Arts and Sciences faculty can be engaged in improving their portion of the total effort.

Richard W. Clark
Bellevue, Washington

What Employers Say Students Should Know and Be Able to Do

The U.S. Department of Labor's Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) report, issued in 1991 on the heels of the Bush Administration's national goals statement, placed student learning objectives within the context of a real environment—the competencies and capacities that “today's high-performance employer seeks in tomorrow's employee.”

Teaching and learning the following competencies, the report argued, must become the tasks of U.S. schools and students. Students should become skilled at managing or using:

1. Resources. Workers schedule time, budget funds, arrange space, or assign staff.

2. Interpersonal skills. Competent employees are skilled team members and teachers of new workers; they serve clients directly and persuade co-workers either individually or in groups; they negotiate with others to solve problems or reach decisions; they work comfortably with colleagues from diverse backgrounds; and they responsibly challenge existing procedures and policies.

3. Information. Workers are expected to identify, assimilate, and integrate information from diverse sources; they prepare, maintain, and interpret quantitative and qualitative records; they convert information from one form to another and are comfortable conveying information orally and in writing as the need arises.

4. Systems. Effective workers understand their own work in the context of the work of those around them; they

understand how parts of systems are connected, anticipate consequences, and monitor and correct their own performance; they can identify trends and anomalies in system performance, integrate multiple displays of data, and link symbols (e.g., displays on a computer screen) with real phenomena (e.g., machine performance).

5. Technology. Technology today is everywhere, demanding high levels of competence in selecting and using appropriate technology, visualizing operations, using technology to monitor tasks, and maintaining and troubleshooting complex equipment.

In addition, SCANS identified a three-part foundation of intellectual skills and personal qualities they considered part of each of the above five competencies:

1. Basic skills. Reading, writing, mathematics (arithmetical computation and mathematical reasoning), listening, and speaking.

2. Thinking skills. Creative thinking, making decisions, solving problems, seeing things in the mind's eye, knowing how to learn, and reasoning.

3. Personal qualities. Individual responsibility as well as self-esteem, sociability, self-management, and integrity.

For a copy of the SCANS report contact the U.S. Department of Labor, 220 Constitution Ave. NW, Room C-2318, Washington, DC 20210, or call 1-800-788-SKILL.



HORACE

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Box 1969, Brown University
Providence, RI 02912

Now schools that have been struggling to keep up with their states' new curriculum frameworks and accountability requirements may for the first time find those policies reinforced by the federal government. At the same time, the political scramble to define "what students should know and be able to do" gets ever more complex and contradictory.

Over a dozen national subject-area associations huddle separately over content standards that outdo each other in sweeping goals; but no mechanism exists to integrate these goals so a teacher can realistically attempt to meet them in the crowded school day. State legislatures and education departments debate "performance outcomes" that define the thinking skills students must master across the disciplines, but few assessments of such skills exist, so schools and students are still rated and selected by the multiple-choice measures of the past.

Essential schools have a head start on the accountability issue, because they emphasize public exhibitions of student work before the local community.

And many school people express fury at the hypocrisy of a system that holds them accountable for improving student performance without holding political authorities accountable for providing adequate support for schools.

Despite the inherent contradictions in the current political discourse, however, Essential School leaders recognize the importance of working with policymakers to reach their shared objective of more rigorous standards for all American students. "Just as we ask schools

to stay with the hard work of doing honest and meaningful student assessment," says CES Chairman Theodore Sizer, "we must work for the best possible resolution at the national policy level. We may not agree on all the means by which these standards are achieved, but we are committed to staying in the conversation."

Coalition member schools have a crucial role to play in this discussion, Sizer points out. To start with, they are already engaged in asking themselves what they want of their students and how they will know when they have it. As they pioneer new strategies of curriculum and pedagogy that challenge all students to master essential thinking skills, and as they exhibit the results in new forms of assessment, all eyes will be on them.

"We have a head start on the accountability issue in many ways," Sizer observes, "because of our long-standing emphasis on public exhibitions of student work before the local community." And because the Essential School principles stress assessment as a key step in learning, not an ad hoc event that occurs after teaching and learning are done, they bring an important perspective to the national discussion about testing.

Instead of worrying about whether their actions will fit whatever new policy shoe is poised to fall, Coalition leaders say, Essential schools should lobby hard for their states to give them latitude, support, and a significant voice in the setting of state standards. If they succeed, the state can help them take a giant step forward, out of isolation and into a network of shared resources, shared philosophy, and substantive rewards from college admissions to funding partnerships.

"The time has never been more ripe for Essential schools," declares Sherry King, superintendent of the Croton-Harmon school district in New York's Hudson River Valley. "A lot of legislation out there is supporting what we believe in." New York's educational Board of

Regents, indeed, has approved a "New Compact for Learning" that embraces the Essential School philosophy in virtually all its aspects.

But as other education departments write their own prescriptions for state-by-state reform, Coalition member schools might look hard at the assumptions that underlie those standard-setting procedures. The big issue now is not whether but how state and national standards and assessments will drive the schools of the future. The critical questions affecting everyone from the first-year teacher through the highest level of policymakers revolve around who defines and develops those standards, by what means student progress toward them is assessed, and how the resulting information is to be used.

Who Will Set Standards?

Tensions are already evident between teacher-generated and "top down" efforts to define standards and between subject-area emphases



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As education departments write state-by-state prescriptions for reform, schools should look hard at what underlies those standard-setting procedures.

and cross-disciplinary ones. In a flagship effort at standard-setting that won high praise for its participatory process, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) recast its K-12 curriculum, putting inquiry and problem-solving at the center of how students learn math. Schoolteachers worked closely with university professors and mathematicians on developing the curricular standards and providing practical guidelines for teachers on how to put them into place. Actual classroom change has been creaky and laborious, mostly because the NCTM standards represent a dramatic shift from how almost every U.S. student (though not those in other countries) has learned math in this century. The new standards literally require a fundamental re-education of teachers and parents—an early warning, many critics believe, to those who think new standards can change schools without substantial investment of time and resources.

In eight other subject areas—science, history, geography, civics, English, foreign languages, the arts, and physical education—professional and scholarly organizations are currently at work on standards of their own. Many of these efforts are funded at varying levels by the U.S. Department of Education, and they will probably define the federal government's approved "content area standards." Some of them include teachers in their process; others keep their distance from the messy realities of the classroom.

New York's New Compact for Learning Reflects Essential School Principles

New York was once heavily committed to large-scale testing on two tiers (standardized Regents Competency Tests and more challenging subject-area tests that led to a Regents Diploma). But the state's New Compact for Learning, adopted by its Board of Regents in 1991, has galvanized state policy-makers into a new push that will ultimately give responsibility for individual student assessments to localities.

The state's major role would be to assess programs, using sampling techniques and state-of-the-art performance assessments to test whether students have achieved the state's learning outcomes in key areas and at key points in their development. The state would work closely with schools to support local development of assessment programs that fit each school's goals and curriculum, and to provide access to a bank of assessment tasks and instruments. And it would evaluate and approve school-level assessment so that it aligns with state goals for teaching and learning, and so the data obtained is cumulative, coherent, and comparable.

Certain uses of tests (such as mass-administered standardized placement tests for young children and tests to separate or track "talented" students) would be proscribed. Instead, the state wants local assessments to identify students' talents and shape instruction to make the most of them across the curriculum.

If the new system takes effect, all students will work toward a unitary Regents Diploma, which provides for three levels of distinction. Graduation would follow completion of a "Regents Portfolio" that exhibits competency across the curriculum as defined in the state's learning outcomes. If a school so chose, it could include state-developed performance assessments to satisfy certain requirements. The Regents Competency Tests (RCT) would be replaced by such new assessments, which would allow for different levels, but not different kinds, of performance.

Finally, the state aims to report student performance according to criterion-referenced information, not norm-referenced percentile rankings. Rather than averaging their data, it aims to aggregate longitudinal data about each student over time, so the state can analyze actual growth in performance rather than average data from a shifting student population. And it would revise its current Comprehensive Assessment Report (CAR) to emphasize the school's program, practices, funding, and other resources that affect its students' opportunity to learn.

Also at the federal level, a very different set of standards has been put forward by the Labor Department's Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) report. This document, which takes a cross-disciplinary perspective, defines the workplace skills high school graduates need to succeed in the new economy, and it reflects on means to assess those skills. Though not technically part of the Goals 2000 initiative, it has already played a substantial role in the national discourse on standard-setting. (See sidebar, page 12.)

The same tensions inherent in

these few examples show up as state departments of education struggle to come up with their own new definitions of student success and ways to measure it. Some states include teachers early on; others start with high-level task forces and lobby for general acceptance later on. Some states start by defining subject-area "curriculum frameworks"; others cross the disciplines to describe "learning outcomes" in terms of thinking skills. All the while, the states and the federal education department are eyeing each other warily, wondering if the plans of one may pose a threat to the other.

How to Assess Students?

The answers may hang, in the end, on what means those intent on school accountability use to assess student progress. Again, an array of possibilities presents itself, from the top to the bottom of the educational bureaucracy.

The original Bush plan to include a national test in the legislation (which was then dubbed "America 2000") met with so much protest that it was dropped; but many policy-makers still hope that test-makers will invent a way to "calibrate" state tests so that student scores will be comparable across the country. A number of states are putting their money into developing or buying new tests that emphasize open-ended questions, problem-solving strategies, essays, and other "performance" tasks. This, reformers hope, will encourage teachers to spend more class time on practicing the higher-order skills that old-style tests ignore—in-depth reading and discussion, research and invention, solving complex problems, initiating projects, and creating original work.

California, for instance, recently started giving all students in grades 4, 8, and 10 in several subjects its California Learning Assessment System (CLAS) tests, a combination of open-ended, in-depth questions and "enhanced multiple-choice" questions that require more complex thinking. The tests, which are

teacher-scored, rate students on a criterion-referenced proficiency scale rather than using the old-style norm-referenced system.

In addition, California is encouraging teachers to use portfolios as an ongoing, classroom-based performance assessment. One pilot program has teachers in grades K-12 learning to document student progress across the curriculum by means of the California Learning Record, an adaptation of the observation-based British Primary Language Record that has won high praise for its usefulness with multilingual populations and its involvement of parents and students.

New York's New Compact for Learning calls for a combination of classroom-based and state-assisted assessment that uniquely reflects Essential School thinking. (See sidebar, page 3.) The state would work closely with schools to support local development of assessment programs that fit each school's goals and curriculum and to provide access to a bank of assessment tasks and instruments. Graduation would follow completion of a "Regents Portfolio" that exhibits competency across the curriculum as defined in the state's list of desired "learning outcomes." Along with Central Park East Secondary School, Urban Academy, and University Heights High School in New York, six new "Coalition Campus" high schools begun in New York City this year already specify "graduation by exhibition" of specific cross-disciplinary tasks. (See sidebar, page 5.)

The Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS) concentrates on assessing six instructional goals: basic skills, core concepts, self-sufficiency, group membership, problem solving, and integration of knowledge. Each year all students in grades 4, 8, and 12 must take conventional multiple-choice tests; but they are also assessed using classroom-based performance tasks and portfolios of their best work. In addition, teachers of students in other grades

A few states are combining portfolio assessment with standardized tests to get a broader and deeper picture of student achievement.

are urged to incorporate continuous performance assessments into daily activities.

Connecticut's Common Core of Learning outlines what the state's high school graduates should know and be able to do, and since 1989 its education department has been working on math and science performance assessments that reflect these goals. They rely largely on tasks embedded in the curriculum, which last from a few days to a week or more; students design and carry out investigations including gathering data, solving problems, and presenting their work orally and in writing. Teachers are coached in how to prepare and score students, and the state also annually evaluates a random sample of eleventh graders against the goals of the Common Core of Learning.

Vermont's ambitious new assessment system requires all teachers in grades 4 and 8 to keep portfolios of students' best work in mathematics and writing. Teacher-run regional networks train them in selecting appropriate tasks and scoring them according to a finely tuned rubric; visiting committees validate each school's scores by rescoring random portfolios. The state supplements this information with a conventional test with which to compare districts' progress.

Meanwhile, whether or not their state is involved in redrafting its standards and expectations, many reform-minded districts and schools have taken the lead in experimenting with classroom-based alternative assessments like portfolios, projects,

CORRECTION

HORACE 10:1 (September 1993) gave incorrect contact information for two of the programs listed on page 8. The correct information is:

University of Southern Maine:
207-780-5499

University of Hartford
(Connecticut)
School of Education, Nursing and
Health Professions: 203-768-4649

We apologize for any inconvenience.

Another Way of Measuring Up: One School's Graduation Requirements

As students prepare for graduation at Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS), a high school of 450 students in an East Harlem neighborhood in New York City, they work intensively to prepare a portfolio of their work that will reveal their competence and performance in fourteen curricular areas. This portfolio will be evaluated by a graduation committee composed of teachers from different subjects and grade levels, an outside examiner, and a student peer. The committee members examine all of the entries and hear the students' oral defense of their work to determine when each student is ready to graduate.

Of the fourteen portfolio items, seven are presented orally before the graduation committee, four from the core subjects (asterisked below). The other seven entries are evaluated independently, and the student may be asked about them during the graduation committee hearing. While the final review is based on the individual student's accomplishments, certain portfolio requirements can be met with group work.

1. Post-graduate plan. Each student outlines his or her purpose for earning a diploma. This section includes long- and short-range career and life goals, financial concerns, living arrangements, and indicators of progress such as examinations, interviews, and letters of reference.

2. Autobiography. This reflective project may examine family history, special events or relationships, values or beliefs in any of a variety of form.

3. School/community service and internship. Opportunities for working and serving others are part of student experiences starting in seventh grade. Students develop a formal resume of their work experiences along with a project demonstrating what they have learned from one or more of them; this may include essays, videos, work samples, reference letters, and the like.

4. Ethics and social issues. Students demonstrate their capacity to see multiple perspectives, weigh and use evidence, and reason about social and moral issues by staging a debate, writing an editorial, discussing important issues raised by a novel or film, or another project.

5. Fine arts and aesthetics. Creative expression and creative appreciation are both evaluated. Students must create a hands-on exhibition of performance in any of the arts and also show understanding or knowledge of an aesthetic area by studying or critiquing a work, an artist, or a field of artistic expression.

6. Mass media. Through a project or activity that includes a relevant bibliography, students must demonstrate understanding of how different forms of media work and how they affect people and their thinking.

7. Practical skills. Students must show evidence of working knowledge in a number of areas (health and medical care, employment, citizenship, independent living, computers and technology, legal rights) in a variety of ways (securing a driver's license, registering to vote, operating a computer).

8. Geography. A teacher-made test and a student-designed performance are used to evaluate geographical knowledge and the ability to use geographical tools such as maps and globes.

9. Second language and/or dual language. Students must demonstrate competence in a language other than English as a speaker, listener, reader, and writer. (This can be done via the New York state language proficiency exam or a College Board exam.) In addition, all students must describe their personal experience with dual language issues and be prepared to discuss a key social or cultural issue associated with language use.

10. Science and technology.* Students must demonstrate knowledge in traditional ways—a summary of the work they have completed in high school and passage of a teacher-made or state competency test—as well as in performances that demonstrate use of scientific methodology (e.g., conducting and documenting an experiment) and awareness of how science is used in the modern world (e.g., by staging a debate or conducting research on a scientific development analyzing social costs and benefits).

11. Mathematics.* Students must demonstrate basic skills knowledge by passing a state competency test and a teacher-made test. In addition, they must demonstrate higher-order thinking abilities by developing a project using mathematics for political, civic, or consumer purposes (e.g., social science statistics or polling; architectural blueprints) and either scientific or "pure" mathematics (e.g., using mathematics in a scientific application and/or studying a theoretical problem).

12. Literature.* Students prepare a list of texts they have read in a wide range of genres to serve as the basis for discussion with the graduation committee. They also submit samples of their own essays about literary works or figures, demonstrating their capacity to reflect on and communicate effectively about literary products and ideas.

13. History.* In addition to passing a state competency test or faculty-designed test in history, students must prepare an overview of the areas of history they have studied in secondary school and a timeline of major significant events and persons. They must also demonstrate understanding of historical work by conducting historical research using primary and secondary sources and developing a bibliography. Their work must draw connections between and among past and present events, weigh and use evidence, speculate on other possibilities, and evaluate how history is used or abused in current debates.

14. Physical challenge. Students demonstrate and/or document their participation and proficiency in any team or individual sport or activity over the past four years. The goal is to encourage the development of lifelong health habits and attitudes of independence, interdependence, personal responsibility, and sportsmanship.

A more extensive final senior project is also required in an area of particular interest to the student, which may be one of the portfolio items explored in greater depth.

Portfolio items are evaluated for quality and demonstrated mastery using a grid that reflects five major criteria: a viewpoint that encompasses wide knowledge and deep understanding; an ability to draw connections among information and ideas; appropriate use of evidence; an engaging voice and awareness of audience; and use of proper conventions. When students have completed the portfolio, they have learned to inquire, critique, analyze, present, and defend their ideas. They have also learned to manage long-range tasks that require invention, planning, perseverance, initiative, reflection, and revision. In short, they are ready for the world outside of school.

In many Essential school classrooms, teachers have begun embedding ongoing assessment tasks in the curriculum itself, rather than treating them as separate from the rest of teaching and learning.

and exhibitions.

In Pittsburgh, the ARTS PROPEL portfolio program, which is linked with the Performance Assessment Collaboratives for Education (PACE) group at Harvard University, assesses student progress in writing and the arts by means of "processfolios," as Harvard's Dennie Palmer Wolf has dubbed them. These include not only a student's best work but the drafts that led up to them, adding to the folder the critical element of student self-reflection. Another pioneer of district-level performance assessment is San Diego, where the CES-affiliated O'Farrell Community School is a leader.

And in many individual Essential school classrooms, teachers have similarly begun embedding ongoing assessment tasks in the curriculum itself, rather than treating them as separate from the rest of teaching and learning. Projects, exhibitions, and demonstrations all offer windows into student progress that can inform curricular decisions on an individual and a program level.

Which Tests Do What

Amid all this experimentation, states are continually looking for better methods of holding their schools accountable to the larger community—ranking and comparing one to the other within the state and even across the nation. And even states

in the midst of reform, it seems, like to get their data for such comparisons from standardized tests (either conventional or "performance-based") that they give either to every student or to a statistical sample selected at random. At the heart of any decision to use one kind of assessment instrument over another is how the results are scored.

Conventional standardized tests are commonly scored using a norm-referenced system, in which scores compare how one student did on the test compared to some other group of test-takers answering the same questions. The point is to provide a general gauge—usually in the area of basic skills—of individual achievement and school success.

Conventional testing continues to be widespread in many places. Such tests as the Metropolitan Achievement Test, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, and the Stanford Achievement Test are required for Chapter 1 funding. School districts in many states use them for other sorting and selecting purposes as well, and also as their principal accountability device; local newspapers often report schools' average scores, for example.

An important disadvantage of norm-referenced tests is that the data are often ambiguous or even meaningless when one tries to interpret them. For example, using average test scores to decide whether a school is showing improvement in its program has a fundamental flaw, as Columbia's Linda Darling-Hammond and others point out. A school's average overall performance can "improve" simply by juggling who takes the test—by labeling more students for special education to count them out, for instance. And it can "decline" if a school has a sudden influx of children who need help the most—non-English speakers, for example—no matter how good a job it may be doing.

A still more serious disadvantage is that teaching to such tests in order to boost scores can actually hurt students' real intellectual achievement, since the test format

emphasizes isolated low-level skills.

Advocates of performance-based testing call instead for criterion-referenced scoring, which measures how individual students do on specific tasks. Instead of reporting, for example, that the average eighth grader scored 60 percent on a standard test of written English, a criterion-referenced test might reveal that 60 percent of eighth graders did not use evidence well in writing an explanatory essay.

One proponent of this approach is the New Standards Project, a heavily funded research effort involving eighteen states and headed by Lauren Resnick at the University of Pittsburgh and Marc Tucker at the National Center on Education and the Economy. Working with the national disciplinary organizations, the project aims to fashion a national examination system that allows for significant flexibility and discretion at the state and local level.

What Is at Stake

Once student performance can be quantified, the results can be used in many ways, not all of them consistent with the original goals of performance-based assessment. Some states reward teachers and schools when their students meet performance standards and impose sanctions when they don't. In many states, test scores still serve as a means to track students into ability groups they will stay in for years. In Kentucky, teachers can lose their jobs and schools can lose funding when they don't come up to snuff.

Some states reward teachers and schools when their students meet performance standards and impose sanctions when they don't.

Sizer on National Standards: 'A wise division of labor and separate spheres of influence'

In Horace's School: Redesigning the American High School (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992) Ted Sizer uses the efforts of the fictitious Horace Smith and the faculty of Franklin High School as a framework for considering various aspects of school reform. The following is an excerpt from the book.

[One] obligation of the state is to solicit, assert, and assess the standards for students and for schools. This obligation arises at the simplest level from state constitutions—the requirement for “thorough and efficient” schools—but more is required, especially in a world far more complex than it was when the “thorough and efficient” doctrine was first expressed. In the last decade, most state governments have greatly expanded their testing programs—the preferred method of “setting standards”—because they are relatively inexpensive and can be kept neatly away from the hurly-burly of actual school operation. Most of the examinations programs swirl in politics. Few are properly funded, and they garner paltry academic results and rouse profound disrespect from the individuals involved, of all ages.

Not surprisingly, many political leaders are looking for some means other than standardized testing as a qualitative yardstick and as an instrument to encourage students and schools to meet that standard. They seek tests that are valid in the sense that they “measure” qualities we desire rather than items that are but tokens of those qualities. These leaders are also concerned that what is measured should be the real power of a child, that child’s enduring habits, not just what he has prepped for passing a test.

Questions abound. How can a school simplify and deepen its curriculum if the tests continue to reflect the description of the course of study as English-mathematics-science-social studies-language-physical education, each presented in isolation from every other? How is the school to press students to show us that they can resourcefully use knowledge, and to display the habit of that use, if there are on the horizon few tests of habit and, in many quarters, even now still little interest in pursuing them?

Most important, who is the state to tell families the substance and standard of everything provided by a school? When so many thoughtful people disagree about the shape and substance of key ideas in several of the areas of the high school curriculum, what group can properly claim that it speaks for us all, setting a national standard...? If schools are to be measured by that national standard, what does this say about the state’s respect for community standards? Do not families have some rights of control of a public service? To put it most bluntly, are there not proper limits to state power over the minds of adolescents?

Franklin High School’s plan suggests a wise division of labor and a separation of spheres of influence. The

four-part system of accountability safeguards the proper interests of the larger community—the state—and those of the parent and student. There will be some limited standardized testing in certain areas. Portfolios maintained by and for each student will be accessible to teachers, the student’s parents, and representatives of the state, who will conduct “audits” of the students’ progress and, thus, of the school’s effectiveness. Horace’s committee desires assistance from the state’s staff—friends who know the school well enough to describe, criticize, and defend it

on its own merits. In this respect, it implicitly suggests an American version of Her Majesty’s Inspectors of Schools in the United Kingdom, at least in their role as outsiders supportive, critical, and above all informed about a particular school. Franklin will make substantial annual reports to the community and will discuss them in public session. Added to this local accounting is the influence of accreditation by regional authorities; their decennial reviews, if thoughtfully conducted, inform a community about its school’s merit and challenge individual schools to sharpen and defend what they believe and how they act upon those beliefs.

Also implicit in the report, however, is the conviction that matters such as the literature assignments, the shape of history and science curricula, and the very culture of the school are all of such importance, delicacy, and sensitivity to reasonable debate that they must be left to local discretion. Families must feel welcome to address their concerns directly to the people who have the power to make or change decisions affecting their children.

Of course, local discretion will always be and always has been affected, however obliquely, by a host of influences pressing toward “national standards”—by regional accrediting associations, by competitive scholarship programs, by specific requirements for admission to individual colleges, by employers who insist on evidence of serious preparation, by the ebb and flow of scholarship, by choices made in the textbook-publishing industry, by prevalent notions, whether sensible or nonsensical. Serious people at the local level are no more or less smart about these matters than people at the state or national level; they are influenced by no fewer or greater political pressures than found at higher levels of government. Differences across schools may be not only the price of freedom but an excellent vehicle to maintain openness within American education.

The changes will be messy. Democracy is messy. Those who want an orderly solution toy with democracy, that form of government beset with flaws but better than any of the alternatives. Those who assert that “the people” can never be trusted with setting standards sing an arrogant, dangerous tune.

Differences across schools may be not only the price of freedom but an excellent vehicle to maintain openness within American education.

This "high-stakes" reasoning is tantamount, Darling-Hammond charges, to ranking hospitals by their mortality rates. "They would get rid of their AIDS units, they would get rid of their cardiac care units, and everyone would go into pediatrics in order to get their statistics up," she says.

One antidote to possible abuses of this kind, critics suggest, would be to include other factors with any reports of schoolwide scores. Rhode Island, for example, has begun reporting a school profile that includes extensive

information about the school budget, the teaching staff's experience, the community's socio-economic status, and other influential educational inputs. (This practice can be dangerous, however, observes CES's Bob McCarthy, because it appears to condone and perpetuate lower expectations for disadvantaged schools.)

Vermont's portfolios in writing and mathematics, as well as Connecticut's performance tasks, are meant chiefly to provide instant feedback to their teacher-scorers

on what areas require additional classroom emphasis. How well an individual student does on these "low-stakes" assessments will not determine the future success or failure of the student or the school, but only what direction his or her classroom work will take.

Back in the classroom, however, many wonder whether any standards and assessments generated higher up the line can really help local teachers design effective instruction. "Any state's framework is impotent to affect practice unless it

Do-It-Yourself Accountability: How One School Took Stock of Its Standards

"Half our life is spent on internal accountability—talking about whether this or that piece of student work is good enough," says Paul Schwarz, co-principal of Central Park East Secondary School (CPESS) in New York City. "But because we gave up using standardized tests and the accumulation of Carnegie units in favor of exhibitions and portfolios as a way to graduate kids from school, we had to worry about external accountability, too." The school has solved that problem in the most direct way possible—by opening its doors to well-informed outsiders, who look at student work and judge whether it meets their own graduation standards.

"Schools and teachers are not used to doing this," Schwarz says. "It's very frightening, to hand over a piece of work and say, 'Would you have passed this in your school? How would you grade it?'"

CPESS started by asking nine professors from local colleges and universities to visit the school and review the writing quality of five portfolio items in the presence of the staff. "Their ratings and ours were very much in sync," Schwarz says. "We've done it now in history and math as well, and we've found the same thing." More important, the discussion among visitors and staff afterward always turned to curriculum—why certain papers were assigned, how to narrow topics usefully, the role of students in choosing work they cared about.

Next the school decided to look at the entire body of a student's work. "Just because a kid was strong in math or writing didn't necessarily mean they were strong in other areas," Schwarz says. "Together the staff and perhaps a couple of outsiders put all fourteen graduation portfolios on the table and asked what it told us. Were we proud to have graduated this kid? Did we have enough evidence?" The process was incomplete, Schwarz says, because it lacked a key element of CPESS's "graduation by exhibition"—seeing the actual student present and defend the portfolio work before a graduation committee.

Finally, in May 1993 the staff invited some fifteen outside "critical friends" for a day of graduation portfolio review. Schwarz lists them off: "Three teachers from traditional public schools in New York City, three state education department people, some principals of comprehensive high schools, some principals and teachers from our sister schools, a couple of foundation people, and a few outside experts like Columbia's Linda Darling-Hammond, Harvard's Dennie Wolf, and Brown's Joe McDonald."

In a complicated round robin, the visitors inspected three or four complete graduation portfolios ("one who barely passed, one in the middle, one very strong"), interviewed students of comparable achievement (two seniors and one recent graduate) about their skills, and watched videotapes of students defending their work. They talked to teachers about academic requirements and to co-principals Schwarz and Deborah Meier about the structure of the school, and finally they offered their own critique and recommendations.

"The group agreed that our graduation process generated plenty of evidence on which to grant diplomas in New York State," Schwarz says. "They raised some important issues about quality: for instance, should we require one paper to be perfect in form? Different people had different perspectives—the principal of a comprehensive high school in Brooklyn would react one way, and someone whose daughter goes a private school another way."

The whole event served, this principal says, to satisfy the school's obligation to share its curriculum and assessment with others and get critical feedback. "We want to open the process of standard setting to the outside world—to let people look at what kids are really doing," he says. "As one of the pioneers in performance assessment, we've embarked on a serious accountability process."

(The school has produced a 30-minute film on the CPESS graduation exhibition process; it will be available for viewing at the annual CES Fall Forum in November 1993.)

is designed as a continuous learning opportunity for teachers, not just for kids," says Joe McDonald, who directs the Coalition's Exhibitions Project. "The main purpose of all assessment systems has to be to generate local energy and invention in the interests of all kids' achievement."

On this side of the philosophical fence are TheodoreSizer and other Coalition leaders, who question both the cost and the effectiveness of standardized testing, which removes the classroom teacher from the work of performance assessments.

"Do we need to create a teacher-proof assessment system?" asks Croton-Harmon superintendent Sherry King. "For one thing, these things are horrendously expensive to develop. And whenever teachers get packets of performance-based assessments from somewhere else, they're in danger of teaching in a formulaic way, just like they did to the old-style tests. You might as well give them workbooks!"

Ted Sizer frames his objection along different lines. Every community, he argues, has its own deep-rooted values that show up in its school curriculum, reflecting what local people want their graduates to know and be able to do. The tradition of local authority over schooling rests on the principle, he says, that those most affected—parents, community members, and the like—can influence what their children are taught and tested on. Except in three areas he calls relatively free of the "value clash"—clear writing, resourceful reading, and everyday mathematical reasoning—he believes the state should steer clear of the testing and curriculum business. Instead, states could insist that schools maintain good files on every student and could regularly audit those files against state standards, providing richer and fairer data at far less expense than mass testing entails. And they could oblige every school to present its own assessments to public scrutiny every year, publishing an annual report and

What to Look for In Your State's Reform Plan

State education department efforts to draft new standards and assessment plans vary widely, influenced by a variety of pressure groups. To help sort through the important differences among plans, the following questions may prove useful.

- ✓ Will the state test every student for comparison and selection purposes? Or will it sample random students using matrix sampling methods for the purpose of assessing school and district programs?
- ✓ Will the state use assessment results to reward and punish schools and teachers financially? Or will it use data to identify where schools need extra help?
- ✓ Has the education department authored statewide curriculum frameworks describing what students should know and be able to do? Has it called on teachers to develop and share those standards? Through what avenues of influence are teachers explicitly invited to share in the discussion?
- ✓ Will the state rely on one or two tests with which to measure student performance? Or will it provide banks of alternative assessment practices and instruments for schools to use?
- ✓ Do state guidelines echo subject-area-based curriculum standards developed by professional disciplinary organizations? Or do they cross disciplinary lines to describe broader thinking skills and performance outcomes that can be demonstrated in a variety of areas?
- ✓ Does the state dictate the curriculum and assessment materials to which teachers must shape their classroom practice? Or does its plan include time, money, and resources to help teachers renew their practice and generate their own new instruction and assessment methods?
- ✓ Is the rating system intended to sort and select students against a high standard of performance, with some failing in the inevitable bell curve? Or are all students expected to meet the goal, with the system taking responsibility for shaping strategies to get them there?

holding a public meeting to defend it. (See sidebar, page 7.)

A few states are trying to incorporate such attitudes into their efforts to define standards and test student performance. New York's New Compact for Learning, for instance, favors teacher ownership of the assessment process—what officials term "top-down support for bottom-up reform." Policies lean toward the most individual of evaluation processes—getting the school community to review its own standards by opening itself to the scrutiny of its key stakeholders. Central Park East Secondary School, for instance, last year invited a committee of local college and

university professors, business people, and others to review its graduation portfolios and answer whether the school's standards lived up to their expectations. (See sidebar, page 8.)

California's school restructuring movement has devised a protocol that asks each school's teachers to scrutinize its student work and discuss together whether it meets their own standards. "We ask the school to use what they learn in assessing their own students' work to drive change in their own curriculum and pedagogy," says Maggie Szabo, a former Coalition regional coordinator who now heads the state's school restructuring effort. "It recasts