

Some Takeaways from 2014-15 Task Administrations

In 2014-15, fifteen Oregon teachers tried out performance assessments to contribute to the development of the Performance Assessment Resource Bank. These teachers were asked to participate in a virtual conversation with other teachers and EPIC staff led the collection of feedback. Following are some of the takeaways from those conversations.

Some Benefits

Students Engaged, Stretched, and Thinking. Across the board, all Oregon teachers shared that with the performance assessments they saw increased student interest, buy-in, and engagement. Many reported that this kind of assessment that a feeling of authenticity that is missing from most other parts of school. As an added benefit of authenticity, teachers shared that they felt like they got to know their students better through the work they produced. Engagement does not come easy, so to speak. Almost all teachers felt like these high engagement tasks were also the most challenging work they asked their students to do all year. The challenge lay in the open-ended nature of tasks with no “right” answer. Students were asked to think harder, learn deeper, and take intellectual risks.

Prior Experience and New Features. About half of participating Oregon teachers had used curriculum-embedded performance assessments prior to participating in this study. Some teachers were members of professional learning communities specifically working on performance assessment for several years, as was the case in Dallas High School. Others pointed to Oregon’s CIM and CAM reforms of the 1990s, stating that there is a long legacy of performance assessment carried on by many of the state’s veteran teachers. Those with prior experience did identify some new and valuable features specific to the tasks from the Performance Assessment Resource Bank: the use of multiple texts in ELA, online research and argumentative essays in science, open-ended tasks with multiple possible solutions, and the inclusion of metacognitive journals or “think aloud” activities.

Some Challenges

Tensions within the Education System. All of the Oregon teachers agreed that the performance assessments constituted rigorous and engaging work for their students and themselves. Teachers identified tensions between these worthy learning experiences and other demands of the education system. For one, curriculum-embedded performance assessments often take several weeks to complete, all within a school year where many teachers already feel pressure to pack a lot of content and cover all of the expected grade-level standards.



Context Matters. High quality tasks, comprehensive training, and good intentions didn't automatically lead to successful implementation. Like any intervention or innovation, context matters when it comes to curriculum-embedded performance assessment. This was hard work, and many teachers looked to their peers for support, made possible by pre-existing structures in their schools such as professional learning teams and planning time. Participating teachers from one alternative setting cited their school's culture that discourages homework as one impediment to students completing extended tasks that require some work outside class time. Other teachers cited technology as a challenge. Even in schools where homework is the norm, some students did not have access to the Internet or personal computer necessary to complete some components of the tasks designed to be completed at home. And lack of access at home often translated to low technological literacy in the classroom, making even the most basic work very time consuming for some students.

Resources and Support Needed

Both virtual conversations ended by asking teachers to think beyond their own experiences to describe the kind of professional learning supports that their peers would need to build the assessment literacy necessary to integrate performance assessments into regular instructional practice. All teachers stated that a key to building assessment literacy will be in the professional learning communities at their schools. Teachers want to work with other teachers to build tasks into scope and sequence, strategize scaffolding, and calibrate scoring. Schools, districts, and state learning systems need to provide the structures, time, and resources to support this kind of collaboration.