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Quality Criteria for Systems of Performance Assessment

for School, District, and Network Leaders

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Systems of Performance Assessment

K–12 and higher education systems have a shared interest in increasing the number of students who graduate from high school ready for the demands of college and careers. Performance assessments that provide students with authentic ways to develop and demonstrate learning have been identified as a key tool for promoting students' deeper learning and mastery of higher-order thinking skills.[1] In k–12, several schools, districts, and networks of schools are organizing teaching, learning, and assessment around coherent performance assessment systems. These systems leverage intentionally designed policies and systemic practices to provide students, educators, and leaders with sophisticated opportunities to develop and make visible student thinking, as well as the associated data systems and professional supports needed to ensure that all students are supported in mastering academic and 21st-century competencies. In these systems, real-world tasks and projects serve as student learning experiences; opportunities to surface individual student progress and mastery; substrates for educator professional learning and calibrated expectations; and source data for district- or school system-wide monitoring of student subgroup progress and programmatic performance.

Performance assessment systems in schools can be used to cultivate academic knowledge and 21st-century skills in ways that meaningfully and reliably prepare students to engage in college-level work. Indeed, research suggests that performance assessments that are part of sophisticated school systems can be used as a trustworthy source of evidence to inform higher education decision-making in admissions, placement, and advising in ways that expand access and support to students who are traditionally underserved in k–12 and underrepresented in colleges and universities.[2] While many k–12 system leaders are eager to develop and cultivate these kinds of coherent teaching-learning-assessment systems, it can be challenging to understand (1) what high-quality k–12 performance assessment systems should look like and (2) how to support districts or school systems in growing from their current state toward developing, enacting, and refining systems of performance assessment.

Using This Resource

The Quality Criteria for Systems of Performance Assessment (Quality Criteria) is designed to support school, district, and network leaders in examining their existing systems for evidence of the policies, structures, and features that enable the use of performance-based assessment in service of deeper learning for all students. By using the criteria, indicators, and recommendations described in this resource, system leaders can assess their current context, identify high-leverage opportunities to further advance performance assessment systems, and design next steps to navigate their specific contexts.

This resource includes the central commitments and essential practice areas for high-quality performance assessment systems, sample indicators for each practice area, an example of a school system using the Quality Criteria, and recommendations for how system leaders can use the Quality Criteria to advance performance assessment systems in their contexts.

Quality Criteria for Systems of Performance Assessment

The Quality Criteria for Systems of Performance Assessment capture a set of research-based expectations for what it takes to support high-quality performance assessment systems within k–12 schools, districts, and networks. The Quality Criteria are based on a review of relevant literature and have been vetted by a panel of academic scholars and practitioner-experts. As defined by the Quality Criteria, high-quality performance assessment systems comprise four central commitments and three key areas of practice.

Central Commitments

Performance assessment systems that advance meaningful learning for all students are built upon four central commitments that provide the foundation and orientation for all performance assessment activities. These commitments that such systems are designed to prioritize are as follows:

1. **Equitable opportunities and outcomes.** The system is designed to enable students to build upon their assets from their diverse experiences, cultures, and languages to demonstrate mastery of core competencies. The system holds all students to the same high standards by recognizing strengths, providing supports, and removing barriers to accessing and demonstrating success on rigorous, culturally responsive material. A commitment to achieving educational equity includes a demonstrated belief that student success is not predetermined by student race, ethnicity, culture, sex, gender, English proficiency, immigration status, special education status, socioeconomic status, or residential status, nor membership in any other locally defined group.

2. **Development of key competencies.** The system explicitly defines in a formal statement (e.g., a graduate profile) the content knowledge, skills, and dispositions it is supporting all students to develop on a progression of learning. The statement presents a clear and comprehensive vision of the academic and social-emotional competencies required for college, career, and civic engagement. Approaching mastery of any given competency requires progression along a continuum of understanding and demonstration of learning across new contexts and situations.

3. **Aligned teaching and learning.** The system is grounded in teaching and learning designed to promote students' development of complex knowledge, skills, and abilities. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment are aligned to infuse performance-based learning into daily classroom experiences across subjects and grade levels.

4. **Systems learning for continuous improvement.** The system enables ongoing, authentic, robust demonstrations of learning that provide a body of evidence for what students know and are able to do, and for their continued development over time. Teams of teachers and leaders iteratively review the design, delivery, and student outcomes of performance assessments to inform adjustments to the tasks and aligned instructional practice.

Practice Areas

High-quality performance assessment systems leverage three key practice areas in specific ways to build a robust assessment system designed to provide feedback and monitor student progress in ways that promote deeper learning for all students. These practice areas are as follows:

1. **Assessments.** What are the features of assessment instruments that contribute to high-quality performance assessment systems?

2. **Supports.** What infrastructure, policies, and practices are needed to systemically support educators in using performance assessment systems to advance teaching and learning for all students?

3. **Data practices.** What routines, processes, and communication structures help educators, leaders, students, and families make meaning of performance assessment data in ways that actively promote better teaching and learning for all learners?

Table 1. Criteria for High-Quality Performance Assessment Systems

Assessments that:	System Indicators for Assessments
• Develop student mastery • Are embedded in and inform instruction • Encourage students to own their learning • Span multiple formats and occasions • Yield trustworthy judgments	• Shared articulation and understanding among educators, leaders, students, and families of the competencies students are expected to develop (e.g., graduate profiles). • System-wide availability and use of high-quality, varied performance assessment opportunities that both support and monitor student learning along clear progressions toward end-of-instruction goals. • Performance assessments used in systems provide students with authentic and compelling opportunities to develop and demonstrate learning. • Assessments used for systems-level decision-making and progress monitoring leverage performance assessments (e.g., performance tasks, portfolios, capstones, etc.). • Opportunities for performance assessments to be used within instruction as part of student-driven cycles of performance, reflection, and revision. • Well-defined rubrics, scoring guidance, and grading policies that connect performance on assessments to (1) progress toward end-of-instruction goals and (2) actionable next steps to advance student learning.
Supports including:	**System Indicators* for Supports**
• Guidelines for assessment design • Processes to ensure reliable scoring • Inclusive instructional practices • Meaningful professional development for educators	• Shared articulation and common vision for instruction among educators and leaders that focuses on authentic, discipline- and developmentally appropriate, student-driven inquiry as the way students develop and demonstrate complex knowledge, skills, abilities, and dispositions. • Common, principled approaches for performance assessment design, and appropriate professional learning for educators to engage in the design process. • Routine, structured collaboration time for educators to collaboratively analyze and score (when appropriate) student work in response to performance assessments, including opportunities to calibrate as well as discuss observations, trends, and instructional and programmatic next steps. • Policies and practices that routinely and systematically support all teachers in using performance assessments as an essential component of student-centered, culturally responsive teaching and learning for all learners, including multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and racially diverse learners.
Data practices that:	**System Indicators* for Data Practices**
• Report outcomes securely and accessibly • Provide analysis for teaching and learning • Support student-specific decisions • Inform system learning	• Differentiated data systems make appropriate information—including reports based on both qualitative and quantitative measures—about student and program progress available to stakeholders in the time frame and format needed to impact student learning. • Systemic and routine opportunity and support for students, educators, families, and leaders to make sense of the information available to them over time. • Multiple measures are used to inform all high-stakes decisions for individual students as well as aggregate groups and programs. • Routines and norms for examining data, including (1) disaggregated by student sub-group as well as other geographic, demographic, and contextual features, (2) centered on diverse learners, and (3) oriented toward asset-based and culturally responsive interpretations. • Information about student progress and performance is triangulated with available information about students' opportunity to learn—to create opportunities and target supports, not to limit student opportunities or access to meaningful learning. • Educators and leaders are supported in connecting interpretations of student performance to appropriate actions and next steps, with a focus on systemic/opportunity-to-learn considerations.

Note: These indicators are examples of important features of systems, rather than a comprehensive guide. Because coherent systems require that assessments, supports, and data practices work together, indicators may appear in multiple practice areas, or may be relevant across multiple practice areas.

Source: Learning Policy Institute. (2022).

System Spotlight: The New York Performance Standards Consortium

The New York Performance Standards Consortium (NYPSC) is an established network of secondary schools that has used performance assessments and graduation profiles for two decades. The consortium's performance-based assessment system is grounded in the in-depth, inquiry-based curricula designed for state standards and taught by all consortium teachers. Following Consortium guidelines, teachers develop a series of performance-based assessment tasks to determine readiness to graduate. These are scored using common rubrics within each of the core academic subjects. In addition to their written papers, students are required to present their portfolios with a formal presentation and then respond to audience questions about their work, much like a dissertation defense.

The Consortium attributes the success of their assessment system to "the professionalism of the teacher-practitioners, the extensive collaboration and support they provide each other, and the active participation of students." The Consortium has cultivated systemic infrastructure, policies, and practices to provide systemic and ongoing professional development to all educators within the Consortium. For example, the Consortium's Center for Inquiry works directly with Consortium teachers to support and enable teacher-led professional development. Through the Center, the Consortium coordinates intense collaborative professional learning time and opportunities for educators to share their expertise and learn from one another, including by (1) collaboratively developing, refining, and sharing curriculum and courses that are content-rich, culturally responsive and student-centered; (2) developing curriculum-embedded performance assessment tasks and rubrics, (3) regularly calibrating their scoring, and (4) participating in and supporting other teachers' performance assessment activities by participating in student defenses, reviewing student work, etc. Notably, the Consortium conducts annual moderation studies for task quality and scoring reliability, which ensures that both task expectations and the associated scoring are aligned to learning goals, calibrated across schools, and yields trustworthy judgments.

The Consortium's robust assessment system is supported by diverse data practices that leverage a wide range of information about student and program progress, including student performance assessments across subject areas; external evaluations by department of education superintendents, members of the Performance Assessment Review Board, and external research; and data on students' postsecondary activities. When coupled with robust opportunities for teachers and school and network leaders to examine teaching and learning indicators throughout the year, these external evaluations and evidence of student progress from end-of-instruction performance assessments allow the Consortium to surface actionable and trustworthy information about system and student performance—without routine use of state standardized assessments.

To learn more about performance assessment at New York Performance Standards Consortium, visit http://www.performanceassessment.org/.

Recommendations for Using the Quality Criteria

- **Use the Quality Criteria as a thinking tool with a committed team.** Performance assessment systems require deep and sustained commitment and collaboration from a range of stakeholders across school systems, including system- and school-level leadership, instruction and assessment leaders, teachers, students, and families. Cultivating a plan for distributed engagement, including a diverse leadership team and authentic stakeholder engagement throughout the development and implementation of the system, will help ensure that the performance assessment system designed will be successful. System leaders should consider reviewing the Quality Criteria and indicators together with a committed and diverse team as a way to organize a process to investigate current understanding of performance assessment systems and areas to learn more, inventory current work, develop a strategic plan, and identify next steps.

- **Celebrate and build on assets of your existing system.** High-quality performance assessment systems are not built overnight, and there is no one way to create a system that will work in every context. System leaders should work with their teams to use the criteria to identify existing bright spots along the three practice areas, and leverage those strengths. For example, some systems may find that they are engaged in transformative professional learning for teachers around curriculum implementation, and a meaningful next step would be to integrate opportunities for student work analysis from curriculum-embedded performance tasks into the ongoing professional learning infrastructure. In another system, system leaders may find that they have made substantial progress in developing robust data practices that include routines for considering multiple measures and root causes for student performance, and that students do not have opportunities for meaningful and authentic learning in all content areas. In this system, leaders may decide to commit to revising their assessments to include authentic performance to signal and incentivize the kind of teaching and learning students should experience.

- **Consider choosing an initial focus area.** Some systems may find that there are particularly compelling reasons—such as other complementary initiatives, recent instructional materials or professional learning funding and adoption cycles, potential for new assessment contracts or packages, or educator or community interest—to choose a grade-band or domain area to begin understanding and advancing performance assessment systems. System leaders can use the Quality Criteria to help them better understand the opportunities and next steps within these focus areas.

- **Leverage complementary tools and research.** The Quality Criteria provide a synthesis of high-level criteria and indicators of high-quality performance assessment systems. System leaders and their teams may find it helpful to collaboratively consider research, tools, and other resources that have been developed to support the development of better teaching, learning, and assessment systems. These resources may include case studies and examples of other performance assessment systems as well as performance assessment tasks, common and content-specific quality criteria for performance assessment instruments, examples of validation of performance assessment systems through college readiness, and features of high-quality professional learning efforts that can support the practice areas described in the Quality Criteria.

Appendix

The Quality Criteria for Systems of Performance Assessment have been informed by the following sources:

- California Performance Assessment Collaborative. (n.d.). *Guiding principles for equitable performance assessment systems*. Learning Policy Institute.

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Endnotes

1. Guha, R., Wagner, T., Darling-Hammond, L., Taylor, T., & Curtis, D. (2018). *The promise of performance assessments: Innovations in high school learning and college admission*. Learning Policy Institute.

2. Fine, M., & Pryiomka, K. (2020). *Assessing college readiness through authentic student work: How the City University of New York and the New York Performance Standards Consortium are collaborating toward equity*. Learning Policy Institute.

About Reimagining College Access

Reimagining College Access is an initiative led by the Learning Policy Institute in collaboration with EducationCounsel. It brings together a diverse group of k–12 and higher education policy and practice leaders engaged in using authentic assessments of students' competencies and mastery of skills needed for college, work, and life in the 21st century. Visit http://learningpolicyinstitute.org/rca to learn more about the initiative and its work.

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