

Coalition for Multiple Pathways to a Diploma

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Performance-Based Assessments in New York State

“Performance-based Assessments,” or PBAs, are a method of determining student proficiency wherein students complete specific tasks, projects, or portfolios of relevant work that demonstrate their knowledge in the subject. Thoughtfully developed and meaningfully implemented, PBAs at the high school level can provide a more fair and reliable alternative to the New York State Regents Exams, the high stakes standardized exams students currently must pass to graduate from high school.

Importantly, PBAs that are aligned to New York State standards have the potential to better serve the needs of students who often struggle with the Regents exams even when they have passed all coursework and mastered the material.

PBAs can take on many forms and should be developed in consultation with education experts and community stakeholders representing a diverse array of students, including students with disabilities and English Language Learners (ELLs). While the characteristics of PBAs for New York should emerge from such a process, the sections below list some common benefits of robust PBA systems, as well as guiding principles that may inform development in New York State.

Benefits of PBAs

- ▶ **PBAs are a reliable assessment tool.** Research attests to the validity and reliability of PBAs in measuring student achievement.¹ To minimize potential for teacher bias, PBAs are typically graded by independent evaluators or panels (usually at the district or state level).
- ▶ **PBAs are part of learning, rather than a distraction from it.** When rooted directly in classroom curricula, PBAs serve as a meaningful part of classroom learning. While some PBAs are more standardized, others grant some flexibility for students to design their own projects, promoting student ownership of their work and allowing students to demonstrate proficiency through their own ideas.
- ▶ **PBAs allow students to both demonstrate and *develop* proficiency.** While instructors are never allowed to “coach” students on tasks or projects, PBAs can allow for complementary tutoring or instruction to address gaps in proficiency. Some PBAs also permit students to revise and resubmit tasks or projects if the first attempt does not demonstrate mastery. The goal of these assessments is both to achieve and document mastery of the material.
- ▶ **PBAs minimize factors that unfairly disadvantage students on standardized tests.** Unlike most standardized, timed multiple choice tests, PBAs can allow students to carry them out over a longer period of time, helping to reduce test anxiety. With some PBAs, student tasks or projects can be adapted to the experiences and background of the students, thus helping eliminate bias against certain demographic groups (such as students of color, students with disabilities, and English Language Learners).² PBAs provide diverse learners with more ways to show what they actually

¹ Ruth Wei, Raymond Pecheone, and Katherine Wilczak, “Performance Assessment 2.0: Lessons from Large-Scale Policy and Practice” (Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity, December 2014), https://scale.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/Performance%20Assessment%202.0%20Final_Digital.pdf.

² Channa Cook-Harvey et al., “Equity and ESSA: Leveraging Educational Opportunity Through the Every Student Succeeds Act” (Learning Policy Institute, November 2016), <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/equity-essa-report>.

know and can do, whereas standardized tests represent a “snapshot” of performance, often following weeks of rote test prep.

- ▶ **PBAs require students to meet higher standards.** Student-led tasks or projects require students to exercise creativity, critical thinking, and innovation—21st Century Skills seldom called upon by standardized exams.

Recognizing the potential of PBAs as innovative, reliable accountability tools, the Every Student Succeeds Act allows states to explore using them as part of their assessment and accountability systems.³ A number of states, including Colorado, Kentucky, Oregon, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Virginia, and Washington, are all in various stages of integrating performance-based assessment options into their high school graduation requirements. In New York, nearly 40 high schools are part of the New York Performance Standards Consortium, through which – under a special state waiver – they are permitted to use PBAs in place of Regents exams. These schools persistently achieve comparatively higher graduation and post-secondary outcomes for students, including for students with disabilities and English Language Learners.⁴

Recommendations for Implementation in New York

In lieu of each Regents exam, all students should be given the option of demonstrating their knowledge and skills through State-developed performance-based assessments or State-approved performance-based assessment systems, completing a series of tasks/projects in contexts that are familiar and relevant to their high school experiences. Schools with demonstrated capacity to develop performance-based systems should continue to be supported. We also recommend that New York State review the experiences of other states that have provided students with performance-based options in lieu of standardized tests. As guiding principles, meaningful PBA implementation should:

- ▶ Align with college and career readiness standards and provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate their proficiency in relation to these standards.
- ▶ Offer clear rubrics and criteria for assessing student performance.
- ▶ Take into account the needs of students with disabilities and English Language Learners.
- ▶ Provide students and families with the opportunity to take ownership over their own learning by choosing the assessments that they will complete.
- ▶ Provide students with multiple opportunities to complete their assessments. If proficiency is initially not demonstrated, students should be provided feedback and given additional opportunities to demonstrate proficiency(ies).
- ▶ Use data on student performance on the assessments to help improve instruction.

³ “Every Student Succeeds Act,” Pub. L. No. S. 1177—114th Congress, § Section 1111(b)(2)(B)(vi) (2015).

⁴ “Educating for the 21st Century: Data Report on the New York Performance Standards Consortium” (Performance Based Standards Consortium, n.d.), http://performanceassessment.org/articles/DataReport_NY_PSC.pdf.