

In Kentucky, Moving Beyond Dependence On Tests

By Anya Kametz | June 1, 2014

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The white, split-rail fences of horse farms line the two-lane road that takes you southwest from Lexington. It's a beautiful half-hour drive to Danville, Ky. Settled in 1783, the town is proud of its history. In Constitution Square, across Main Street from Burke's Bakery, sits a tiny log cabin that was once the first post office west of the Allegheny Mountains.

A few minutes away, Bate Middle School is a more mundane '70s-era, red-brick building. But what's happening inside is anything but mundane. I've driven the 37 miles from Lexington see one of the most closely watched efforts in the country to change the way schools assess student learning. Principal Amy Swann and the district's superintendent, Carmen Coleman, have completely overhauled their school's educational philosophy, moving away from standardized tests toward an approach called performance-based assessment.

Kentucky was the first state in the nation to adopt the Common Core and the tests that align with it. This spring, the 1,700-student Danville district thinks it's found a better way to teach the Core.



A school in Danville, KY has become a national exemplar.

On a Wednesday afternoon in late March, I am waiting in the whitewashed hallway outside Diania Henderson's seventh-grade science class to see performance assessment in action. The seventh-graders are sporting dresses, jackets and ties. When the end-of-day bell rings, they file into the basement cafeteria, quiet and tense, with only a few poking each other in the sides, for a snack of cheese crackers and Capri Suns. It is the day of the Science and Math Performance-Based Assessments, or, as everyone calls them, the PBATs.

The whole seventh grade spreads out in small groups across the school building. Most of them are toting three-sided posterboards, like you might remember from middle school. But over the next two hours, as dusk gathers outside, it becomes clear that this is no ordinary science fair.

The entire curriculum at this school has been redesigned around interdisciplinary projects, which take several weeks to complete. The English and social studies seventh-grade PBATs were group projects that took place in the fall.

One by one, the students stand and give a 20-minute solo presentation with a PowerPoint or video. Separately, they've handed in 15-page research papers. They're giving these presentations to panels of judges made up of teachers from other grades or the high school, officials from a neighboring district, education students from the University of Kentucky, and fellow students.

When it's his turn, apple-cheeked Charlie Hall explains how he was able to lower the heartbeat of his Doberman, Rosie, and stop her from wolfing down her food by petting and talking to her.

Claire Strysick, with her hair in a neat bun, speaks about the impact of oil spills and presents the results of a chemical analysis of aquarium water polluted with petroleum.

A special education student and aspiring chef earns the top mark of "Outstanding" for a detailed presentation on surface tension and various seasonings.

I watch as student after student confidently answers questions about the steps of the scientific method, experimental design, math concepts like mean and median, and, most impressively, how the project relates to his or her life. And they listen respectfully to each other, giving helpful feedback.

Most projects are graded "outstanding" or "competent." A few are judged "needs revision," which means the students will keep working on them until they pass muster.

There is high-level learning on display here, from the math and science content to independent research and public speaking skills. Yet Bate isn't some gifted school. Of the 400 students, 69 percent qualify for free and reduced lunch, and 38 percent are members of minority groups. About a fifth are in special ed.

Schools Can Do Better

Five years ago, when Carmen Coleman took over as superintendent, Bate Middle School was on the state "watch list" because of its low test scores. The state commissioner even made a surprise visit to the school to decide whether to shut it down.

And so in the fall of 2011, Coleman asked her friend from graduate school at the University of Kentucky to take over as principal. "She didn't say, 'Come take over my worst school,' " Swann recalls with a laugh. "But I just saw amazing teachers and kids."

Swann got right to work, reorganizing the staff, introducing project-based learning and setting expectations with a "Danville diploma" that included social and emotional skills, ethics, technological literacy, career readiness. In 2013, the school was designated an "exemplar school" by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, one of just 25 in the nation.

"There's maybe 10 people around the country who really understand how to demonstrate authentic learning through student work, and two of them are in Kentucky," says Tom Vander Ark, an author and former schools superintendent who has written extensively on school improvement.

What makes the Danville experiment particularly noteworthy is that Kentucky was out ahead of the nation on adoption of the Common Core State Standards for English and math. Swann believes the standards are worthwhile, but thinks schools can do better than the tests that go with them. Though the new Common Core tests have been touted as improvements over what they replaced, she says they are really "the same old multiple choice," and adds, "I feel like on a standardized test you're really showing what kids don't know."

Swann and Coleman started looking for alternatives. Together, they visited award-winning schools all over the country, such as Big Picture Learning, an international network of over 100 schools that focus on individual passions, and High Tech High, a school in New Jersey that uses computers in every class.

They were most impressed with a group of 39 schools in New York state called the Performance Standards Consortium. Since 1997, these public schools have been exempt from state standardized tests. Instead of working from textbooks, students in performance schools create research projects, both solo and in groups, and present them for detailed feedback.

Students in these schools produce documentary films. They research position papers on immigration policy, conduct scientific studies of visual perception, and create mathematics puzzles.

"It makes a big difference if kids are doing something that they care about," says Ann Cook, the leader of the consortium and founder of Urban Academy Laboratory High School, a Manhattan public school in the consortium. According to the most recent data available, Consortium schools in New York City have a dropout rate that's less than half the city's — 5.3 percent compared with 11.8 percent. And these students also perform better in college.

From New York To Kentucky

In October of 2012, Swann traveled to New York to see a "moderation study," where teachers at different performance schools get together to review each others' assignments and examples of students' work. This is yet another way in which performance teachers collaborate and solicit feedback to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

One assignment in particular captured Swann's attention. "The teacher asked the students to design an amusement park ride. They had all the math in there, and physics, and it just really sparked something in me: that math doesn't have to be this boring class with lectures and standardized tests. I said, 'Let's take this back to Danville.' "

When she got back from New York that fall, Swann held an all-hands staff meeting in the school library. "I said, 'What if we designed a whole new assessment system?' They said, 'That's not possible.' " Swann described all the exciting teaching and learning she'd seen in New York. "They said, 'We like this better than the regular tests. We'll be behind you.' "

Swann asked for an anonymous vote on the new plan, and 98 percent said yes.

A bill to allow Danville to skip the state tests unanimously passed the House in April of this year but was shot down in the Senate. The state Department of Education says discussions to find alternatives are ongoing. Regardless of what happens, the district will still give the ACT and its practice tests in 8th, 9th, 10th and 11th grades. (ACT scores are tied to scholarship money for public university students in Kentucky, and the nationally recognized test will help them benchmark student learning.)

But the yearly grind of prepping for weeks for state tests is over for now. Swann says it's making a big difference in what teachers do every day, especially in their ability to tailor instruction to each student's needs and interests.

With standardized tests, she says, "from August to April I have to cover this content, and it doesn't matter if the kid is all the way up here, I have to pull them back down to review what they already know. And for the low-scoring kids, if I rush them through everything, they'll have a better chance of guessing it on the test. Everything with school ranking and teacher ranking is based on the tests, when instruction should be based on reaching the individual student and moving them forward."

Walk into a classroom at Bate and you can see students discussing their work together in small groups, clustered around a book or computer. The teachers circulate, ready to help where needed, or pull out a student to work one-on-one.

Kathy Merryman, the president of the Parent-Teacher Organization, has seen the evolution as her two children moved through Bate. I meet her in the hallway before the seventh grade PBATs, where she is helping a nervous student in a plaid shirt and bow tie rehearse his presentation.

"Every teacher on the staff is here for these kids," Merryman says, "and they are here till 6 o'clock tonight. And any teacher is willing to help out anyone who has a question. And they've all embraced performance-based learning, from the most traditional teacher to the most nontraditional teacher."

"I have never worked in a school before where the teachers are all on board with one concept and one idea," agrees Larry Ebert, a special education teacher. "Our goals are the same, and it's all about what's best for the kids. It really does take that collaborative aspect in order for the students to succeed."

Assessing Performance Assessment

Performance assessment has had a small, passionate group of supporters going back decades, especially among self-described progressive educators who think standardized tests are too blunt and too one-dimensional to measure the full range of how students learn.

It's related to two more widespread approaches: project-based learning and portfolios. Projects, like the familiar science fair, are usually a special add-on to the regular curriculum. Portfolios, which you may remember from art or creative writing class, seek to give a richer, multidimensional picture of students' capabilities by assembling a body of work.

These approaches allow students to follow their own interests and lean into their strengths. They are usually graded with a rubric, not a percentile. They address skills like presentation, communication, and teamwork that are common in the workplace but not part of most traditional schooling—or state-mandated testing.

On top of all that, performance assessment focuses on demonstrations of learning to outside evaluators. Students get a "reality check" by taking their learning before members of the community, and teachers who haven't taught them.

The experiment at Bate takes this approach a step further by making performance assessment the cornerstone of the entire curriculum.

Of course, there are reasons U.S. schools have gravitated toward standardized tests instead. They're (relatively) cheap, easily administered, and they carry the promise of some kind of "objective" measure. In other words, they're "standardized."

Performance assessment is the opposite of all that, and that is one reason it hasn't become widespread. With all its potential, performance assessment does set a very high bar for teachers and school leaders.

"To embrace projects and performance assessment as the core pedagogical approach is obviously a gigantic shift," says Vander Ark. Even Cook, the head of the consortium in New York, agrees that it's "not necessarily for everybody."

In fact, Kentucky itself implemented a statewide high-stakes assessment system in 1992 called "KIRIS," that included student portfolios of work, performance tasks, and tests featuring open-ended questions. A 1996 report by an outside consultant found that teachers and principals thought the system was good for instruction and raised expectations for students, but was burdensome and stressful to put in place. In 1998, the state dropped it.



The Danville Diploma is part of a new approach to learning at the school.

However, as disquiet with standardized testing has grown, there's been a corresponding rise in interest in performance assessment. Supporters see it as an antidote that can be rigorous and address 21st century skills while also engaging students.

The chief state school officers in Kentucky and eight other states have formed a group known as the Innovation Lab Network. These states have adopted performance-based learning as one of their "critical attributes" for a successful school. (The other states are California, Iowa, Maine, New Hampshire, Ohio, Oregon, West Virginia and Wisconsin.)

Several of these states are moving to include a performance-assessment option in public schools. Vermont is taking similar steps, and there is a New England Secondary School Consortium

of 400 high schools using it as well.

With performance assessment taking root in Danville, Swann and Coleman are now moving on to expand it to more places. Coleman has left the Danville district to take a position at the University of Kentucky's National Center for Innovation in Education, where she hopes to oversee the founding of a performance-standards consortium like the one in New York. A neighboring district, Trigg, has expressed interest in joining Danville in giving up state tests.

"We need to make a gigantic shift," says Coleman, echoing Vander Ark. "Our kids are getting shortchanged because we're trapped in this rat race of preparing for assessments."

Amy Swann, meanwhile, has taken a new job as Chief Learning Officer at a national organization called Matchbook Learning, based in Atlanta. She will be working to turn around more bottom-five-percent "watch list" schools in Detroit, Newark, and soon possibly in New Orleans and other cities.

'Who Bubbles In Answers At Their Job?'

While there's no data yet on how the approach is working in Danville, support for the idea in the schools and the community is high.

Twelve-year-old Charlie Hall proves an excellent spokesperson for what's happening in his school. "I liked school before, but now that we've taken this initiative into project-based learning, I really, really like it," he says over Skype from his living room.

Growing up with his mother and stepfather in Danville, Charlie has always been a good student, cheerful and independent. Besides playing with his dog Rosie, he likes playing soccer and making videos in his spare time. His PBAT project, on Rosie's heart rate, included an astonishingly slick video, complete with soundtrack, that his mother says he shot and edited all by himself.

"Before, we would take tests like every single day and write long answers," he explains. "So the transition from that really tight monotonous structure to a very free-flowing environment in the classroom might be a little different at first."

But he says he sees a huge payoff in the long term.

"Let's get this straight — who is going to be bubbling in answers at their job? No one," he says, sounding like just the kind of engaged, motivated learner that Danville is trying to produce. "We're getting skills that we're actually going to need later on in life. It's really cool."