



Developing common performance-based assessments to inform graduation readiness

November 2023

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As a large school district, the Toucan School District's (TSD)¹ desire to strengthen the relevance of education for their students spurred the initiative to provide high school students with multiple pathways and flexibility to meet graduation requirements. Like other large urban school districts nationwide, a large proportion of TSD's population is represented by minoritized groups with over 50 languages spoken by enrolled students. As noted by a district curriculum coordinator, "diversity is our strength...I'm leading a study with staff across the district to consider how we use 'street data' or lean into what we really need to know about our students as people, as well as learners to build from the experiences they bring as opposed to the experiences dictated by teachers or the district."

This notion of building relevant learning experiences that connect to student interests, which includes considering the role of assessment to evaluate what students know and can do, in large part motivated the district's decision to move beyond standardized approaches to evaluate student readiness. Three district administrators interviewed indicated that historically, the district's traditional approach to evaluating graduation readiness was to "test students." The district mandated the use of a standardized assessment, in addition to the state's required test, to evaluate graduation readiness. Over time, TSD learned that depending largely on information provided by these tests presented more barriers rather than opportunities for students to demonstrate graduation readiness. In the words of a district curriculum coordinator, "we need better representations of what students can do and what they're capable of and how they use resources...which goes beyond the [score] assigned to students on a standardized test."

To broaden the ways that students can demonstrate graduation competency, TSD moved into the direction

of establishing additional pathways for students to meet graduation requirements. As indicated by the district leader charged with overseeing post-secondary and career success across schools, the work to develop more expansive district graduation menu options started prior to the onset of the COVID pandemic, including developing the capstone process. However, different pieces such as using performance-based assessments as another option surfaced as a new addition to the guidelines during the pandemic. Flores (2022) recommends that developing better opportunity structures for minoritized and marginalized populations in K-12 in areas such as academic preparation is critical for developing equitable pathways for those students to access better postsecondary opportunities. Consistent with this recommendation, the district's current work on graduation guidelines is focused on providing more flexible options for students to not only demonstrate what they know and can do beyond the information provided by the state's high school test, but is also intended to encourage and enrich students' access to important disciplinary content.

This brief focuses on documenting the work undertaken to implement the performance-based assessments (PBAs) since establishing common PBAs in grades 9 through 12 in math and English Language Arts (ELA) marked a new development for TSD to expand the graduation guidelines menu. The intention for using the PBAs over time is to fold in the results from these assessments into a portfolio that will then be used as part of the broader graduation readiness assessment which includes the capstone project. This brief also tilts the findings on learnings from implementing the math PBAs since CDE wanted to focus one of these case studies on PBA work in a subject area that has proven to be challenging for PBAs. Additionally, considering the known difficulty of enacting reforms in large urban school districts (Cuban, 2004; Snipes et al., 2002;

¹ District names that appear in this brief are pseudonyms applied to protect the confidentiality of individuals.

Snipes & Casserly, 2004), capturing lessons learned at this nascent stage in this district is intended to help inform this and other larger school districts consider how best to support this type of approach with schools.

The Role of PBAs in Graduation Guidelines

According to the district leader for post-secondary success, the PBAs are intended to provide an alternative and more authentic² approach for students to demonstrate competency in math, English, and other subjects down the line. The launch of this initiative started in the 2020-21 school year with substantial difficulties encountered to develop the PBAs with teachers due to the continued interruptions to schooling caused by the COVID-19 health pandemic, that continued into the next school year. Although district instructional coordinators emphasized the vision to use PBAs as more authentic ways to evaluate student competencies in primarily tested subjects (i.e., ELA and math) used to inform school accountability designations, they also highlighted that the district continues to untangle persisting confusion about the purpose of the PBAs for schools.

Although the PBAs are by design, intended to be used to make competency determinations for all students, these assessments were initially used during the first year of the initiative (2020-21) for credit recovery. This was used for credit recovery since the pandemic increased the number of students who could not meet graduation requirements at TSD high schools. However, the district learned that using the performance assessments for credit recovery as opposed to using these to inform competency generated two issues:

- Confused the communication around the PBAs since many high schools thought that this should only be used for credit recovery and with students that failed math or English courses.
- Unintentionally incentivized certain students to forego coursework and to focus their energy on passing the PBAs to receive course credit.

Based on these two issues, the district communicated to all high schools that beginning in 2022-23, the common PBAs developed for competency determinations cannot be used for credit recovery purposes. The hope is that this vision for using the PBAs for competency determinations and as part of a student's capstone portfolio will emphasize the importance of these assessments for all students rather than for a targeted group of students.

Despite some of the implementation and communication challenges experienced with this initiative, district administrators interviewed acknowledged that the expansion of the graduation menu in conjunction with the uses of the PBAs are consistent with the district's focus on providing more authentic and equitable learning opportunities to students. For this reason, this initiative that is grounded in teaching and learning, is not led by the assessment office that is typically charged with overseeing standardized state and district assessments, but is driven through a close partnership supported by the department overseeing post-secondary readiness success with the curriculum and instruction office. The math instructional coordinator noted that the assessment office may in the future become more involved with this initiative should their charge shift to supporting curriculum and instruction. Although the goals for this PBA work is currently inconsistent with the assessment department's scope of work, the director

² The term authentic is used here to mean that students demonstrate knowledge and skills applied in real-world situations, scenarios or problems (e.g., relative to a specific field or discipline). For the project-based learning community, authentic assessments are commonly designed to engage learners to problem-solve within a real-world context to facilitate deep learning of content and skills.

of the assessment department supports and sees clear value for the PBA work in advancing the district's equity goals and aspirations for students.

The PBA Structure in TSD

For ELA and math, educators involved with the design and development of these performance assessments noted the importance of embedding and/or locating these in the curriculum to increase buy-in from educators being asked to use these tasks in their classrooms. Although different schools may use different textbooks, the district expects schools to follow the sequence defined in the district curricular maps to ensure that schools align their instructional programming with district and state expectations. For both ELA and math, two performance assessments were developed in grades nine through 12, with one PBA administered in the fall and the other administered in the spring. To date, no policies have been communicated to schools around how the PBAs should be used to make competency determinations which means that every school has their own policy to consider how to inform competencies and ultimately, graduation readiness. The only requirement imposed by the district is that only certain PBAs can be used for “graduation competency” evaluations. In grade 9, none of the PBAs may be used for graduation competency but can be used to assess competency for the subject. In grade 10, only the spring PBA can be used for graduation competency determinations. In grades 11 and 12, both fall and spring PBAs can be used by schools to assess a student's graduation competency.

For ELA, the PBA initiative moved into the direction of developing common PBAs in each grade as end of unit assessments. This decision was made to ensure that teachers would see this as an important and integral part of instruction if embedded in instructional units of

study. For math, the district instructional coordinator identified specific locations to embed the PBAs in the district's curriculum map to signal the appropriate places and times for when schools should administer the PBAs during the school year. Since most schools in the district use an integrated math approach, the district's curriculum map highlights the appropriate time for administering a PBA based on math content and practices instructed in different mathematical topics and ideal administration timeframes. For example, the grade 10 PBA in the fall can only be administered sometime in September or early October after having instructed two chapters focused on geometric relationships.

Developing PBAs with Educators

Both content areas (ELA and math) hired school-based personnel (educators and instructional coaches) to assist with the development of the PBAs. The development process experienced multiple interruptions due to the COVID-19 and weather-related disruptions during the 2020-21 school year and moving into the 2021-22 school year. Yet despite these disruptions both content areas developed two PBAs (one for fall and another for spring) in each of the high school grades by the end of the second development year, and worked on refining the PBAs in 2022-23. All task development work took place outside of school hours. When in-person meetings commenced in 2021-22, these were held in TSD's central office. In both content areas, although existing PBAs were reviewed, the district decided to let educators develop these PBAs so that they authored the content represented in the assessments. As noted by the ELA coordinator, “having the teachers develop them established buy-in for them to use the PBAs.”

Looking Forward

Addressing the challenges highlighted in the previous section is not a small lift and represents critical areas for this district and their schools to consider for building capacity and buy-in for educators to use the PBAs to help inform graduation competencies. However, if the district does not attend to these areas and set clearer guidelines and communications around the PBAs, one task developer noted that “schools will resort to check[ing] this [graduation menu] box that CDE has asked us to check in the easiest way possible. As opposed to providing interesting and valuable learning experiences for students, which every educator wants to do...but if you make it too difficult for them, they’re not going to do it...and will go back to old [testing] practices.”

For the 2023-24 school year, this initiative will continue to move forward with the anticipation that more schools will discuss competency expectations informed by results from analyzing student work on the PBAs in the regular professional learning meetings held at every high school. The hope is that these focused discussions on the PBAs during these professional learning sessions will help build capacity for using the PBAs as part of the instructional routines for teachers in the district as well as to communicate clearer or uniform policies on the uses of the PBAs throughout the district.

Acknowledgements

This work is being supported through a partnership with the Colorado Department of Education’s Assessment Unit. The findings from this this brief were made possible through the stellar work and assistance provided by Medjy Pierre-Louis for this project. Special thanks to Angela Landstrum and Robin Russel for their valuable

insights and feedback on this brief, and deep gratitude to the educators and district leaders of “Toucan School District” for welcoming our research team.

About CADRE

The Center for Assessment, Design, Research and Evaluation (CADRE) is housed in the School of Education at the University of Colorado Boulder. The mission of CADRE is to produce generalizable knowledge that improves the ability to assess student learning and to evaluate programs and methods that may have an effect on this learning. Projects undertaken by CADRE staff represent a collaboration with the ongoing activities in the School of Education, the University, and the broader national and international community of scholars and stakeholders involved in educational assessment and evaluation.

Suggested Citation

Diaz-Bilello, E. (2023). Developing common performance-based assessments to inform graduation readiness. Boulder, CO: The Center for Assessment, Design, Research and Evaluation (CADRE), University of Colorado Boulder.

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