A Demonstration of Learning: Alternative Assessment in New Hampshire
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Introduction

Several years ago, in a search for methods of documenting the rich variety of learning that was taking place through New Hampshire's public schools, groups of educators, administrators, superintendents, college personnel, and community leaders came together with the support and leadership of the Department of Education (DOE) to form a workgroup to begin the Competency-Based Assessment (CBA) system. The Competency-Based Assessment Workgroup saw a need for greater articulation of what NH students graduating from public school "are able to do" - what skills and knowledge they are able to immediately apply either in workplace settings or in further educational experiences. The problem was: "We know what students know because we test that, but how do we know and convey what they are actually able to demonstrate, and convey that in a valid, reliable, yet understandable way?"

Using the six NH curriculum frameworks, Career Development, English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, and Arts, as well as notable state and national reports and documents such as the NH Business and Industry Association (BIA) report What Should They Know and be Able to Do?, and the Secretary's Commission on Assessing Necessary Skills (SCANS) Report, ten competencies were identified for NH by the CBA Workgroup. These are:

- Problem-Solving and Decision Making
- Self-Management
- Communication Skills
- Ability to Work with Others
- Information Use (Technology, Research, Analysis)
- English Language Arts
- Mathematics
- Science
- Social Studies
- Arts

With coordination from the DOE, groups of educators from participating school districts wrote performance standards for each of these competencies, based on the NH curriculum frameworks.

CBA Implementation

Between the years of 1998 and 2001, the Department of Education, using Federal School-to-Work monies, sponsored a developmental pilot in which high schools could participate, through a grant application process, in the design of the State's competency-based assessment method. The pilot process, which began with four schools, and increased to fourteen, spurred changes that streamlined and refined both the content and the process of applying performance standards to student demonstration of competency. Having demonstrated through this pilot that Competency-Based Assessment holds great promise for whole-school reform in teaching and learning on the secondary level, the State Department of Education utilized newly appropriated state local assessment monies to institute an implementation phase to begin the school year of 2001 - 2002. In 2003 this process was opened to include all grade levels, K – 12.
The Competency-Based Assessment model in New Hampshire is a whole-school effort that is classroom-applied. Project-based learning is encouraged as a way that both teachers and students can access a wide array of learning styles and multiple intelligences. Teachers function as 'coaches', with the confidence that students learn content not only through lecture but also through inspiration, experimentation, and practice. Projects may cross content areas, allowing teachers to work together to design assignments that have relevance to real world problems and to collaborate to revise and improve curriculum. The learning that occurs outside the school walls is also valued through this assessment method, allowing students to link the relevance of school-based learning with the rest of their lives. The use of a variety of media and technologies, both in teaching and in student demonstration, has characterized most schools' application of competency-based assessment. Peer coaching groups are encouraged, as a way that students can get supportive feedback as they grow towards greater skill development. Teacher-student dialogue, either one-on-one or in small groups, has emerged as the aspect of the competency-based assessment method most valued by both teachers and students. The richness of an interactive discussion about the student's specific demonstrations of skill development work to guide the student toward proficiency in all areas. These dialogues are also learning experiences in themselves, teaching students to reflect on their own work and actions, to evaluate their own performance, to use feedback constructively as an improvement tool, to value direction from caring adults, and to recognize that accomplishment is not a one-time test, but a journey, over time, of incremental steps that will be life-long.

In order to insure within school and across school validity and reliability, CBAS schools engage in reliability, or "moderation" checks at the school and the state levels. Periodically, each school will conduct a group assessment where student work is assessed by more than one teacher, differences discussed, and shared understanding of the Performance Standards reestablished. Twice a year, schools submit random samples of assessed student work to a state reliability team, comprised of the state CBA coordinator and representatives from each participating school. These samples of student work are re-assessed in a blind study, and feedback is given to the submitting school. The organized checkpoints result in an assessment process in which the proficiency level ratings mean the same thing across the state.

Currently 30 schools have implemented New Hampshire's Competency-Based Assessment system, with several others expressing interest for next year. Experienced schools are mentoring and guiding new schools in this method, while the Department of Education continues to provide training and coordination. Each year the DOE plans to provide two CBA Conferences for all participating schools. The first is planned as a teacher-to-teacher training, in which school personnel have the opportunity to learn from CBA master teachers in a variety of specific domains. The second training is an annual Student Exposition that affords students, educators, and the community an opportunity to view and experience the competency-based teaching and learning that is taking place across the state.

**Challenges to Full-scale Use of the System**

Teachers and students engaged in the Competency-Based Assessment system have identified two challenges that impede full-scale implementation. The first is the current problem of an already over-full school schedule that does not allow time for teachers to meet and plan with other teachers, and includes inadequate time for one-on-one dialogue with all but a few students. While teachers and students alike reported that the time spend reviewing practice and
the resultant improvements to teaching and learning were the richest outcome of the Competency-Based Assessment methods, they acknowledged that there was actually no time allowed for this to take place. Teachers and students who benefited from this practice, had to take time from other duties on a temporary basis. Therefore, a recommendation of the CBAS coordinating team is to provide a school structure that allows for this learning dialogue.

The second challenge reported is the high turnover among the highest levels of school and district administration. Whole school reform requires consistent and dedicated leadership over a period of years of gradual but steady development. Teachers and students reported that when their Principals or Superintendents changed, the focus of school initiatives changed, resulting in either starting over or abandoning the reform effort until the new personnel "caught up". Currently, research tells us that the average stay of a district level administrator is two years, while school reform requires five years to become fully implemented and show results.

Future Steps for the CBA System

Two exciting next steps are on the horizon for New Hampshire's Competency-Based Assessment system. One innovation that may assist with the ‘time crunch” experienced by teachers is the development of software that will streamline the record-keeping process. This software, originally developed by Purdue University, is easy to use and can be tailored to suit New Hampshire's specific needs, including the benefit of security protocols. In addition, it can be adapted to collect the individual teachers' Competency assessments of each students work, and flag each Competency as it is completed. Several districts have piloted the use of this software and report the benefits of this electronic portfolio and assessment software.

The Department of Education has also been engaged in collaboration with New Hampshire's college systems to look at competency-based admissions processes and the benefit that this would have on secondary - postsecondary articulation. A group of universities from across the country has formed a coalition, called the Bridges Project. Their goal is to develop such an articulation, and NH may become part of this group.

Competency-Based Assessment is truly a promising and effective practice for New Hampshire's schools, one that increases rigor and relevance in teaching and motivation and meaning in learning. It is ready to take its place as one of New Hampshire's valid tools for demonstrating and assessing what students in our public schools know and are able to do.

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