Exhibiting Authentic
Achievement

By Jill Davidson
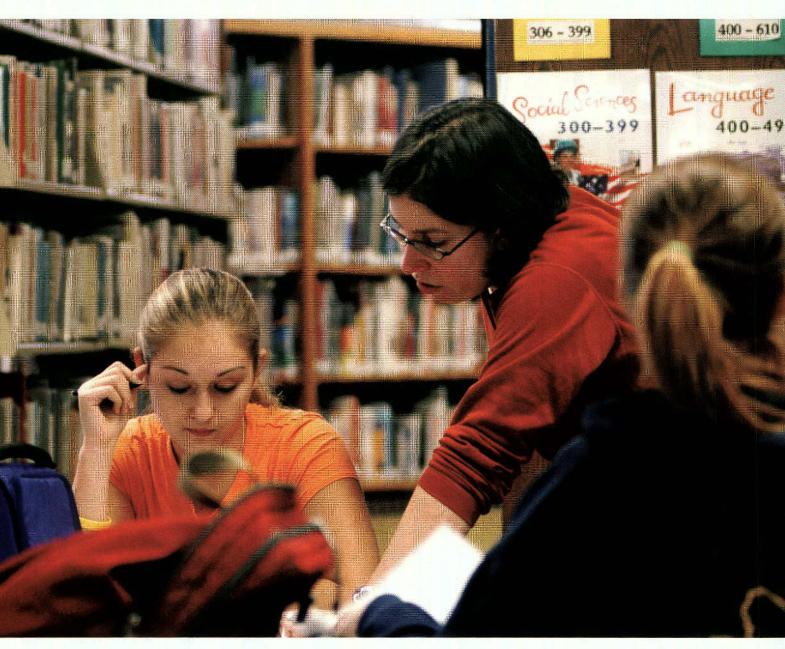
Photo by Courtney Bent

How does one become a successful opera singer?

How and why should the U.S. Electoral College be reformed?

What roles do the shaman and shamanism play in traditional
rainforest communities, and what have those roles become as the
cultures interact with the modern world?

How does massage therapy affect athletes' recovery from a variety of injuries?

What factors affect the trainability of a dog?

These are a few of the essential questions that the 56 aspiring graduates of Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School's class of 2008 presented in graduation exhibitions, the public culmination of their senior projects. In 30- to 60-minute demonstrations of mastery, students spoke and offered evidence that summarized months of investigation and effort. Questions from an evaluation panel and audience members followed their presentations. Unlike many seniors who are *so* done with school by mid-May, seniors at Parker—and their families, friends, and teachers—emanated waves of tension and excitement. For those potential graduates, senior projects were not just show-and-tell and graduation was not a foregone conclusion. Those seniors would not be eligible to graduate if they did not meet or exceed expectations on their senior projects, for which graduation exhibitions are as a key component.

All students at Parker, a 364-student charter school in Devens, MA, culminate their studies with a capstone senior project, an exploration of a topic of their choice that is conducted independently or with the guidance of an outside mentor. An intellectual and personal bridge between high school and the world beyond, the senior project requires students to:

■ Generate an essential question
■ Explore that question by engaging in formal academic research and collaborating with people outside of the school (e.g., through internships, interviews, job shadowing, or field research)
■ Apply skills and knowledge from several disciplines to complete the project
■ Present their project to a panel and an audience.

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The five panel members—a mix of other students, school community members, and outside experts and mentors—individually evaluate the presentation using a rubric and, in deliberations following the presentation, employ the rubric to arrive at consensus. The panel returns a final exhibition assessment of Just Beginning, Approaches Expectations, Meets Expectations, or Exceeds Expectations, and that assessment is integrated with other senior project measurements that have been recorded throughout the year. Taken together, assessments create a nuanced set of measures of each student's achievement and the school effectiveness.

Authentic Assessment

Exhibitions are among the performance-based assessment methods that benefit students and educators. Students gain a sure sense of their capabilities and areas for growth and emerge well prepared for the future by completing projects and exhibitions that replicate the kinds of open-ended challenges faced by people working in a field of study. Through the use of well-calibrated rubrics, educators amass data that indicate the ways in which students demonstrate their mastery of the skills and habits of mind that senior projects demand. Those data also help educators align personal-

ized curricula with state standards and with the kind of independent thinking and abilities that young people who are moving on from high school and into higher education and the work force need.

Authentic achievement is described as "intellectual accomplishments that are worthwhile, significant, and meaningful, such as those undertaken by successful adults," wrote Newmann (1996). "For students, we define authentic academic achievement through three criteria critical to significant intellectual accomplishment: construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and the value of achievement beyond school" (pp. 23–24). Exhibitions support each aspect of that definition because they properly reflect the complexity of schooling. Exhibitions provide a comprehensive view, rather than a limited snapshot, of student achievement and demonstrate that real intellectual work has no right answers that trump other responses. Although they allow students to demonstrate their competence according to state, district, and school standards, exhibitions are unique, personalized work products that represent each student's growth, interests, capacities, response to challenge, and effort.

Exhibitions prepare young people for democratic participation, citizenship, and lifelong learning. They function as rites of passage that help students become poised self-advocates who are able to present themselves to the world. Exhibitions require that students develop the capacity to become intellectually curious, independent learners. And exhibitions have the power to connect students to their callings as they develop essential skills for lifelong success. Students assume responsibility for their own learning, and in so doing, they are able to discover the intrinsic rewards of hard work and intellectual achievement. And the rewards for the school are significant: schools that place a central focus on exhibitions and other forms of performance-based assessment at both classroom and culminating levels demonstrate lower high school drop-out rates, higher college-going rates, and improved college performance and persistence (Coalition of Essential Schools, 2006; Foote, 2007).

Exhibitions and other public demonstrations

of mastery connect to every intentional action in a school community, requiring educators first to develop shared expectations of acceptable and exemplary levels of accomplishment and then to refine the systems of teaching and learning that are geared to get each student to those levels. Professional development must support teachers as they learn to use performance-based assessment throughout the grades and across disciplines and to use data generated by exhibitions and other forms of performance-based assessment to improve teaching and learning. Developing these capacities becomes the center of such schools' professional learning communities, and networks, such as the Coalition of Essential Schools and its affiliate centers, provide valuable support.

Challenges

Exhibitions must be integrated into the overall school program—if they are treated like an add-on, they can be easily removed. Because exhibitions are high-stakes assessments, aligned with standards, and reliable and valid ways of measuring student performance, their power can be compromised when an alternative system, such as high-stakes standardized tests, is superimposed or already exists as the main driver of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. The conflict is complex. Teri Schrader, Parker's principal, said that students' preparation for Parker's school-based assessments actually prepare them well for the knowledge and skills that the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) demands.

"I think we're fortunate," said Schrader. "Our MCAS scores are high, not because our students are different than those in the schools around us, but because the structure of our school reflects the ways that kids learn best. Right now we feel at peace with the tests; we can glean useful data from MCAS English-language arts and math tests. But the state is phasing in MCAS science and history tests, and the data that will be gleaned will force competition between two competing philosophies. The MCAS history test assumes a chronological progression; it's not theme-based or question-driven, and it makes interdisciplinary studies difficult. The choice is between a philosophy

that educates kids deeply and helps them be scholars, or a system that will help them sail through a particular test on which their diploma is based. I'm not sure that we will say in five years that we've learned a lot about our program from the history and science tests."

Though educators at Parker have found ways to use MCAS data, the state has no interest in the data that result from exhibitions and other forms of performance-based assessment. So for Parker and many schools like it, commitment to performance-based assessment demands a constant balancing act between different accountability systems, "complexifing an already complicated system," noted Schrader. The work of fulfilling requirements that are associated with state accountability systems is often at the top of administrator and teacher to-do lists, and conflicts between assessment systems are inevitable.

But some states are creating large-scale assessment systems that incorporate exhibitions and other forms of performance-based assessment. Rhode Island, for example, has developed a statewide system that includes senior exhibitions or portfolios as a component of high school graduation requirements. Washington and North Carolina also require senior projects with accompanying presentations. Such statewide efforts create conditions for exhibitions to guide assessment and instruction not only at the school level but also at the

Exhibitions and Performance–Based Assessment Resources

CES ChangeLab (www.ceschangelab.org) collects best practices and artifacts from CES Mentor Schools. Click on the Assessment tab to download resources that relate to exhibitions and other forms of performance-based assessment from a wide range of exemplary Essential schools.

Additional resources from hundreds of CES schools and affiliate centers are collected at the National Exhibition Month Web site, www.essentialschools.org/exhibitions.html.

New York Performance Standards Consortium

The New York Performance Standards Consortium (NYPSC), an independent organization that is a CES affiliate center, has successfully advocated for legislation that exempts its 28 member schools from most of New York's state-mandated high-stakes standardized Regents tests, thus creating the conditions in the schools for a strong focus on exhibitions-based demonstrations of mastery.

The NYPSC has also created a system for performance assessment using exhibitions, assembling a performance review board of educators, academics, and other authorities to review student work and the processes by which it is evaluated. NYPSC's work serves to link classroom assessment to exhibitions by creating the conditions for sustained daily focus on the knowledge and skills to be evaluated by exhibitions and by ensuring the standards by which student work is evaluated, not only within a school but also among a group of schools.

Visit NYPSC online at www.performanceassessment.org

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district and state levels, developing alignment and capacity throughout school systems and the state departments of education that support them.

Breaking It Down

At Parker and other schools that are committed to the goals of tying graduation to demonstration of mastery, students prepare for their high-stakes senior exhibitions over time. Such schools employ teaching, learning, and assessment practices in classroom settings to rehearse, emphasize, and otherwise reinforce progress toward successful final exhibitions, thereby creating continuity between formative classroom assessments and high-stakes summative assessments. Connecting daily classroom work that emphasizes formative assessment to final exhibitions ensures that students and educators experience exhibitions as the culmination of a system of performance-based assessment that is scaffolded from year to year, is consistent across classrooms, is designed equitably for all students to succeed, and is at the center of the school's instructional design and practice.

Students at Parker, for example, take on projects and present portfolios and exhibitions from the middle level onward; the school uses portfolios and exhibitions to assess students' readiness to move from grade to grade, increas-

ing the requirements and adjusting the rubrics accordingly as they proceed. Though the bar is raised from year to year, the process of demonstrating mastery and assessing through performance-based tasks that include exhibitions becomes common currency for all teachers and students.

Just as an exhibition is authentic work that is presented by a particular student, exhibitions are authentic reflections of a particular school and its culture, goals, practices, and structures. Schools that have designed their curriculum, pedagogy, schedules, professional development, and other structures and practices to support exhibitions in the classroom and as culminating assessments are generally characterized by student-guided inquiry; sustained and deep "less is more" learning; personalized instruction; and such structures as advisories, block schedules, senior institutes, whole-school gatherings for exhibitions and other demonstrations of mastery, academics-driven service learning, interdisciplinary curricula, and age-diverse learning settings. The goal of each structure is to focus on students as workers, build strong relationships among students and staff members, and in other ways support the practice of exhibitions. **PL**

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The Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) is a 25-year-old nationwide network of schools, districts, and support organizations that are committed to creating equitable, personalized, and academically vibrant schools and school systems. CES and its affiliate centers serve as a professional development and support network for schools, districts, and states that are in the process of implementing exhibitions, performance-based assessment, and other related practices and structures. For more about CES, visit www.essentialschools.org

Is Your School Ready?

A performance-based assessment system is an integrated approach to education that underpins the culture of a school and links:

- Curriculum
- Instruction
- A variety of student work over time
- Continuous assessment
- External oversight
- High standards.

If you think this is something your school should explore, use these benchmarks to see if some elements of project-based assessment may already be in place. The following descriptors will help you determine your school's readiness to embrace a performance-based system as the organizing concept for school reform.

EARLY

- Learning about and planning for assessment has become important to the teaching staff.
- Staff development has occurred or been planned around the use of performance-based assessments.
- Some teachers use multiple methods of assessment and performance-based assessments.
- The assessments used are assessed only by the teacher and only for classroom grades.

DEVELOPING

- Teacher-developed assessments enhance rather than interrupt student learning.
- The school uses frequent student assessment to make formative and some summative judgments.
- Performance assessments are a significant part of grade level and graduation promotion requirements.
- Teachers are assessment literate and use assessment data to enhance their individual practice and further promote student learning.
- The school's assessment system—built largely on curriculum-embedded assessment measures—is public (to peers, parents, and community members), valid, and reliable.
- The system uses balanced assessment methods, including selected responses, constructed responses, performance assessment, and observation and personal communication.

TRANSFORMING

- Student work reflects a demonstration of mastery.
- Project-based assessments are aligned with school-wide outcomes.
- Student outcomes are assessed at multiple levels.

Scaffolding is explicit in supporting students over the course of their careers.

- Students are engaged in active learning through discussion-based classrooms, project-based assignments, original research, and experiment design.
- Student choice is embedded in course work.
- The school engages in formative and summative documentation, such as transcripts of previous school history that includes attendance and grades; an intake process that includes interview and writing samples; cumulative documentation of attendance, course performance, tests, student reports, parent-teacher conferences; and staff review of work patterns and work products.
- The school develops multiple strategies for supporting students, such as feedback on written work, narrative reports, student-teacher conferences, parent-teacher conferences, after-school homework labs, and peer tutoring.
- Students have multiple ways to express and exhibit learning through writing, such as literary essays, research papers, playwriting, poetry, and lyrics; oral presentations, such as discussions, debate, poetry reading, dramatic presentation, and external presentations; and artistic renderings, such as sculpture, painting, drawing, and photography.
- Presentations provide time for probing and open-ended questions so that students can demonstrate what they know.
- Graduation-level performance-based tasks are aligned with learning standards.
- External evaluators review student work. They include experts in various disciplines, such as writers, scientists, and historians; other interested evaluators, such as teachers from other schools; and students, parents and school staff members.
- Students demonstrate mastery by documenting authentic, real-world impact and change on their environment. Students internalize a sense of purpose.
- Students demonstrate mastery by applying information in different and unique ways and situations. They show the ability to apply knowledge in innovative or new ways.
- A diploma is awarded when earned. The school's program proceeds with no strict age grading and with no system of credits earned by time spent in class.
- Performance-based assessments are embedded into courses and competency is not based on work done in classes.