Using Performance Assessments to Support Student Learning
How District Initiatives Can Make a Difference

PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT CASE STUDY SERIES

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Abstract

Performance assessments are part of a robust assessment system in which students show what they know by writing an essay, curating a portfolio of work, or conducting original research. Ultimately, performance assessments can allow students to demonstrate college and career readiness through a culminating assessment—such as a graduate capstone or senior portfolio defense. The report on which this brief is based documents the work of three districts involved in the California Performance Assessment Collaborative: Los Angeles, Oakland, and Pasadena Unified School Districts. Through interviews, focus groups, and observations, we identify the key conditions needed to support the implementation of culminating performance assessments at the district, school, and classroom levels. We also examine students' and educators' perceptions of outcomes related to participation in performance assessment initiatives. Finally, we summarize lessons from the districts' experiences with performance assessments and present associated recommendations to district leaders and state policymakers.

The full report can be found online at https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/cpac-district-initiatives-assess-student-learning.

Across the country, educators are seeking assessments of student learning that also support students' higher-order thinking skills, help improve teachers' instructional practices, and can ultimately allow students to demonstrate college and career readiness through a culminating assessment—such as a graduate capstone or senior portfolio defense. In California, some of these educators participate in the California Performance Assessment Collaborative (CPAC), a network focused on high-quality performance assessments. As part of a robust assessment system, performance assessments require students to show what they know, rather than select answers from predetermined options on multiple-choice tests. Examples of performance assessments include composing a few sentences in an open-ended short response, developing an analysis in an essay, conducting a laboratory investigation, curating a portfolio of student work, and completing original research. When students—including Elena Ramos, who is described below—engage in a culminating performance assessment, it can provide a meaningful demonstration of what they have learned.

Performance Assessment in Action

Elena Ramos, a 12th-grade student at a small school in Oakland Unified School District, stands at the front of the classroom, dressed professionally and emanating an impressive calm. She is about to present the findings of her graduate capstone project, a rigorous, yearlong investigation into teen tobacco use inspired by her experience with tobacco marketing after she moved to the United States. Four people walk into the library, take a seat alongside the facilitator, and introduce themselves. One is a teacher and the other three are current students or recent high school graduates.

Elena introduces her research topic with visuals and data. Four years ago, she moved to Oakland. One of the biggest problems she observed: flavored-tobacco products everywhere that were

affecting the health of members of her new community. Elena describes her summer internship with a local tobacco control program, which prompted her interest in researching this issue in greater depth and developing a potential solution. She presents her thesis for the project, explaining, "Tobacco companies intentionally target teens with their marketing. This means teens are more likely to start smoking [early], leading to an overall less healthy community." She points out that the companies' goal is to make money, so they target young people using "kid-friendly flavors" to hook them early on nicotine. Her proposed solution? Ban the sale of tobacco products at grocery stores.

Elena also describes the original research that she conducted, an action research project in which she surveyed 75 students from her high school to learn how frequently they are exposed to tobacco products and marketing. Finally, as she wraps up the presentation to the panelists, she reflects on the scope of this work with pride, saying, "At the beginning of the year, I thought it would be impossible because my first language is not English. At the start, I was scared … of how it would be and of asking for help. Now I'm here. Two of the skills I have improved through this process [are] my public speaking skills and my writing skills." She began the year believing the graduate capstone project to be an impossible feat, and yet she emerged with the tools to be a strong, skilled advocate for her community.

Note: The student's name has been changed.

A substantial body of evidence shows performance assessments are a strategy to improve educational outcomes,[1] but relatively little research examines the key conditions needed to support the implementation of high-quality performance assessments at the district, school, and classroom levels. This brief describes insights from a series of Learning Policy Institute (LPI) case studies that address this issue by documenting culminating performance assessment initiatives in three CPAC districts:

1. **Los Angeles Unified School District (Los Angeles Unified)**, which supports a model wherein a growing number of 12th-grade students in Linked Learning pathways (a program of study that integrates a college preparatory curriculum with career and technical education and student supports) defend a portfolio of their work.

2. **Oakland Unified School District (Oakland Unified)**, which encourages 12th-grade students to complete and present a graduate capstone (an original research project) prior to graduation.

3. **Pasadena Unified School District (Pasadena Unified)**, which requires all 12th-grade students to defend a portfolio of their work in order to graduate.

Our research included educator interviews, teacher and student focus groups, observations of student presentations, and a review of district administrative data and documents in these three districts. Our intent was not to evaluate the impact of the districts' performance assessment initiatives (although we did collect preliminary self-reported outcome data from students and teachers at a few schools in each district, which we include in the report), nor was our intent to evaluate each district as a whole. Our focus is limited to documenting the implementation of these specific initiatives related to performance assessments. We found that these districts each have a unique approach; however, all are committed to assessing student learning in a meaningful way that is aligned with the outcomes they hope all students will achieve by graduation.

District Context

Los Angeles Unified, Oakland Unified, and Pasadena Unified have taken unique and innovative approaches to assessing student learning. Each district grounds its work in a strong vision for how to prepare graduates to succeed in college, career, and life. The performance assessment initiatives in these districts focus on the high school level, although the implications for students and teachers extend to middle school and earlier.

During the 2018–19 school year, these three districts served a population of students who primarily came from low-income families (81% for Los Angeles Unified, 74% for Oakland Unified, and 60% for Pasadena Unified—compared to the statewide average of 61%).[2] The population of English learners also exceeded the statewide average (19%) in Los Angeles Unified (20%) and Oakland Unified (31%).[3] During this time the high school graduation rates and 11th-grade standardized test scores in English language arts and mathematics across the three districts were lower than statewide averages, although the percentage of graduating students in Los Angeles Unified (60%) and Oakland Unified (50%) who met the sequence of course requirements (called the A-G courses) for admission to the University of California or California State University systems met or exceeded the statewide average of 50%.[4]

Los Angeles Unified: A Linked Learning Pathway-Led Approach

Los Angeles Unified is the largest district in this study, with over 600,000 students and more than 1,000 schools.[5] The landscape of performance assessments in Los Angeles Unified has been shaped by the work of Linked Learning pathways, which are autonomous small schools or small learning communities within comprehensive high schools that focus on industry themes. In 2018–19, Los Angeles Unified had 66 Linked Learning pathways across 37 schools, representing approximately 28% of district high schools.[6]

Educators in Linked Learning pathways commit to implementing a portfolio and defense model, through which 12th-grade students collect and reflect upon a selection of work from their high school classes and then present their work in a public defense of their learning. Los Angeles Unified employs an opt-in approach to the growth of Linked Learning pathways and the portfolio and defense model. In order to start a Linked Learning pathway, educators must demonstrate their support through a positive vote and then must engage in a comprehensive onboarding process.

The Los Angeles Unified Linked Learning Office introduces the portfolio and defense in new pathways once staff in those pathways are ready to effectively implement the model (usually within 2 to 3 years of starting up). In 2018–19, 61% of the district's Linked Learning pathways implemented the portfolio and defense model, with approximately 4,000 12th-grade students involved.[7] The remaining pathways will start implementing the portfolio and defense as soon as the Linked Learning Office determines they are ready to do so.

The Linked Learning Office offers extensive support to pathways implementing the portfolio and defense. This support includes ongoing professional learning opportunities and targeted on-site coaching for administrators and teachers. The longer-term vision of the Linked Learning Office is to see the number of pathways increase through a rigorous and well-supported onboarding process, broader adoption of the portfolio and defense model districtwide, and the model's recognition as a form of assessment that aligns with district goals.

Oakland Unified: A District-Facilitated Approach Sustained by Teacher Leadership

Oakland Unified, a midsize district in this study, served over 50,000 students across 123 schools in 2018–19.[8] The district's performance assessment initiative is called the graduate capstone, a yearlong original research paper and presentation that students complete in 12th grade. This initiative emerged as a way to increase the level of rigor and consistency associated with the senior project, a graduation requirement mandated by the district in 2005.[9] In 2013, after years of inconsistent implementation, central office staff strengthened the requirement through opt-in supports, beginning with a collaborative process to draft a district graduate profile and develop associated project rubrics and professional learning opportunities.

As in Los Angeles Unified, the district's Linked Learning initiative has played a key supportive role for graduate capstone implementation. In 2018–19, Oakland Unified had 28 Linked Learning pathways across 14 high schools, representing approximately 82% of non-charter high schools in the district.[10] These 28 pathways enrolled 87% of Oakland Unified sophomores in 2018–19, with a district goal to go "wall-to-wall" and enroll 100% of 10th-grade students in a Linked Learning pathway starting in the 2020–21 school year.[11]

Participation in the Oakland Unified graduate capstone has grown over time, meaning that educators at a site are opting in to using the district rubrics and engaging in professional learning opportunities offered by the Linked Learning Office. During the 2018–19 school year, 19 of 28 Linked Learning pathways participated,

and a total of 1,186 Oakland Unified seniors (approximately two thirds of seniors enrolled in Linked Learning pathways) were assessed using the graduate capstone rubrics.[12] Students who did not participate in the graduate capstone still completed a senior project but were not assessed with district rubrics aligned to the graduate capstone guidelines.

Voluntary, district-led professional learning opportunities related to the graduate capstone are an important strategy for expanding implementation. These opportunities, which are organized as an ongoing community of practice, are open to all high school teachers in the district.[13] In 2018–19, teachers from 65% of Linked Learning pathways attended professional learning on the graduate capstone, an increase of nearly 10% from the previous year.[14] Held five times throughout the calendar year, this professional learning series helps to establish a common standard of rigor for the graduate capstone across school sites.

Pasadena Unified: A District-Led Approach Based on a Shared Vision for Graduates

Pasadena Unified is the smallest district in this study, serving over 17,000 students across 33 schools and programs in 2018–19.[15] As of the 2018–19 school year, all graduating students are required to complete a senior defense, for which they select two to four graded artifacts to include in a portfolio of their best work and present to their teachers and peers. The senior defense emerged in response to a collaboratively developed graduate profile approved by the Board of Education in May 2014. District leaders realized that three skills associated with the graduate profile—research skills, creativity, and communication—were not being effectively taught or measured.[16] They developed the senior defense as a key mechanism to drive this desired change.

Pasadena Unified's existing performance assessment initiative is grounded in the district's long-standing commitment to advancing career and technical education at the secondary level. This commitment began in the 1980s, with the implementation of California Partnership Academies (CPAs), which connected academics with career and technical education in a small and personalized learning environment.[17] Pasadena Unified currently has eight College and Career Academies that represent a blend of the CPA model and the Linked Learning approach and serve 34% of the district's high school population.[18]

When the Pasadena Unified Board of Education revised the districtwide graduation requirements in November 2014, they made the senior defense official district policy, starting with the class of 2019.[19] District staff spent the following 4 years building buy-in for the shift. They also collaborated with technical assistance partners, including Envision Learning Partners and the Buck Institute for Education (now PBLWorks), to develop district rubrics based on a shared definition of quality. As a result of the district's efforts, all 1,067 graduating seniors in the class of 2019 completed a senior defense.[20] To support the implementation of the senior defense, the Pasadena Unified College and Career Academy Office convenes monthly meetings of senior defense site coordinators, who are secondary school librarians tasked with leading the process alongside school administrators, and plans senior defense-focused professional learning sessions.

Key Conditions for Implementing Performance Assessments

The performance assessment initiatives in Los Angeles Unified, Oakland Unified, and Pasadena Unified ask students to conduct research, reflect on their work, and present their learning in a public setting. These initiatives ask educators to guide students through this experience and to design lessons and assignments

that address the skills necessary to succeed in this process. Given the demands of this work, it is important to consider the key conditions that need to be in place at the district, school, and classroom levels in order to implement high-quality performance assessments.

Foundational Policies and Practices Related to Performance Assessments

Although each district took a different approach to policies supporting performance assessments, the common link across all three was some sort of formal commitment that legitimized the work. These policies not only outlined high-level expectations related to the performance assessment initiative, but also established a vision for why this new approach is valuable. They also signaled the importance of the initiative to educators within the districts, who faced many competing priorities. For example, Pasadena Unified and Oakland Unified have board-approved graduation requirements for students to assemble and present a portfolio of their work (in Pasadena) or complete a research project (in Oakland). By contrast, Los Angeles Unified has a structured onboarding process for new Linked Learning pathways, including a commitment that all 12th-grade students will assemble and present a portfolio of work.

Key Starting Conditions

Three key starting conditions were important when introducing performance assessments within the districts: (1) technical assistance, (2) opportunities to observe performance assessments in action, and (3) a strategy to develop and scale performance assessments. Technical assistance, including professional learning supports, played an important role in all three districts. For example, each district worked closely with technical assistance providers to develop trainings, shared rubrics, and related resources. Opportunities to observe performance assessments also played an important role across the districts, in terms of educating stakeholders, garnering buy-in, and ultimately seeking shared ownership of the work. Finally, in all three districts, a strategy to develop and scale performance assessments started with a clear vision for how students should experience the process and then evolved organically in response to schools' needs.

Supportive State and Local Policy and Practice Environment

At both the state and local levels, a supportive policy and practice environment played an important role. This included the focus on deeper learning competencies in the Common Core State Standards and the Smarter Balanced Assessments and the shift away from past high-stakes assessments with the suspension of the California High School Exit Exam. It also included efforts to align education with the changing nature of the workforce and society through the funding of career and technical education initiatives, such as California Pathway Academies and the California Career Pathways Trust, as well as Linked Learning pilots at the state and local levels. These policy changes created opportunities in all three districts to focus on deeper learning competencies and assess student learning in an innovative way.

High-Quality Professional Learning Opportunities

In all three districts, central office staff carefully planned for and organized professional learning opportunities focused on the district performance assessment initiatives. Calibration of expectations for student work and scoring practices among teachers played a central role in these sessions. In many cases, these sessions were opt-in by nature. In Los Angeles Unified and Oakland Unified, educators could participate in a community of practice by attending a multipart sequence of sessions throughout the school year.

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Strong Teacher Leadership, Support, and Recognition

Across the three districts, we observed teachers and other staff taking on a variety of responsibilities to support the implementation of district performance assessment initiatives. For example, teachers scheduled student defense presentations, recruited judges for the presentations, and developed systems and supports for students. This teacher leadership was a vital source of support for school-level implementation. In many cases, teachers received extra planning time and compensation to acknowledge their efforts. Nonetheless, additional planning time, more compensation for extra hours worked, and additional staff positions to share in the work still emerged as ongoing needs in all three districts. The extent to which these added supports were available varied across sites, depending on the size and organizational structure of the school as well as the extent of support from school administrators.

Flexibility for Instructional Leaders to Determine Student Supports

Across all three districts, educators expressed the importance of allowing instructional leaders at each school—including principals, coaches, and lead teachers—to adapt the implementation of the performance assessment process to the needs of their students and community. Although teachers are often the driving force behind successful implementation of district performance assessment initiatives, it is school administrators who have decision-making power about how to allocate resources (including time and money) to support this work at the site level. At the same time, central office staff played a key role in supporting school-level implementation and ensuring equitable access to the performance assessment process for all student groups.

Outcomes for Students and Teachers

This study examined students' and educators' perceptions of outcomes related to participation in their district performance assessment initiatives. Overall, students and educators reported a variety of benefits associated with their experience, which were aligned with previous research.

Student Outcomes

We found that students reported a variety of benefits associated with their performance assessment experience.

Deeper learning. Teachers and students reported that the performance assessment initiatives provided students with an opportunity to demonstrate deeper learning competencies, including engaging in critical thinking and "learning how to learn" by reflecting on their experiences and growth.[21] Research, inquiry, and writing skills played a key role in the performance assessment process in all three districts, as did metacognition (i.e., self-reflection). This process also helped students build their public speaking confidence and develop their ability to ask and answer questions. English learners in particular appeared to greatly benefit from the experience.

College and career readiness. Students and teachers reported that engaging with performance assessments helped to prepare students for the future demands of college and career by increasing the level of academic rigor to which students were exposed. Students in Linked Learning pathways also had an opportunity to sharpen skills aligned with their industry pathway theme, which could be helpful for their future career aspirations.

Social-emotional skills. Students in all three districts felt that the performance assessment process was challenging and provided an opportunity for personal growth and development of social-emotional skills, including perseverance, creative problem-solving, and a growth mindset. Teachers had the opportunity to embed skill development in the overall instructional process in a way that emphasized reflection and improvement, thereby creating new possibilities for growth and agency.

Teacher Outcomes

Teachers, too, reported a variety of benefits associated with their performance assessment experience.

Alignment. The performance assessment process in the three districts highlighted the importance of aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices across subjects and grade levels. Where educators saw performance assessment as a core element of teaching and learning, they shifted instruction to build students' skills in advance of the culminating performance assessment. Teachers reported backward mapping their instruction to ensure that students could prepare for the culminating defense by selecting from a variety of rigorous artifacts, developing research products, and presenting their work.

Continuous reflection. The performance assessment process helped teachers reflect on the ways that they could better support students. This led to a continuous improvement approach to their instruction. In particular, when students developed research papers and other portfolio artifacts and publicly presented their work, it quickly became apparent which assignments and areas of instruction had prepared students for success and which required more attention.

Relationships with students. We found that the performance assessment process can help to build closer relationships between teachers and students. This is partly because students are encouraged to bring their own interests and personal context into the process, and partly because school staff work closely with students to support them through the experience in their senior year. In turn, teachers can get to know their "students as learners" in more profound ways, give students more ownership in the learning process, and help students to feel better known in the classroom. According to the learning sciences, positive teacher–student relationships are related to student motivation, engagement, learning, behavior, and psychological support.[22]

Relationships among teachers. Teachers in two of the three districts reported the opportunity to collaborate closely and develop their relationships with colleagues. This did not emerge as a consistent theme in Pasadena Unified, where professional learning and school-level supports intended to facilitate collaboration were still under development.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

The three districts in this study—Los Angeles Unified, Oakland Unified, and Pasadena Unified—are each making progress with performance assessments while also recognizing opportunities for ongoing improvement. These efforts can benefit both students and teachers in many ways. Several lessons can be learned from the three districts about their performance assessment work.

Lesson 1: Performance assessments can positively influence teachers' instructional practice and students' learning outcomes. The students and educators we spoke with reported a number of positive outcomes

based on their experience with the performance assessment initiative in their district. These outcomes included opportunities to build close teacher–student relationships; to support students in developing and demonstrating deeper learning competencies, social-emotional skills, and college and career readiness; and to encourage teachers to collaboratively reflect on and shift their instructional practice.

- **Recommendation for district leaders:** In order to achieve these types of outcomes as part of a balanced system of assessment, consider implementing or expanding performance assessments that focus on rigorous academics, develop social-emotional skills, increase college and career readiness, build relationships, and help teachers improve their instructional practice.

Lesson 2: A clear, well-communicated vision—grounded in a shared definition of what students should know and be able to do—can support implementation. In our case study districts, when implementation went well, educators started with a clear and shared vision for what students should know and be able to do. This vision was accompanied by consistent and effective communications about the effort. A collaboratively developed graduate profile can provide a foundation for district-led performance assessments, since this process identifies student outcomes for college and career readiness. Once an initial vision for graduates is in place, it may become apparent that instruction and assessment need to shift to better prepare students. When the performance assessment work is starting out, it is important to focus on clear messaging about both the purpose (the "why") and the requirements (the "how") of the new assessment approach. Such messaging, early on, can lead to smooth implementation of a new district performance assessment initiative. The messaging can be reinforced by tools (such as districtwide rubrics aligned to the graduate profile) and professional learning opportunities.

- **Recommendation for district leaders:** Develop a collaborative districtwide vision to guide the performance assessment initiative, accompanied by clear and consistent messaging about both the "why" and the "how" of the work.

Lesson 3: Ensuring that performance assessments are aligned with, and integral to, district curriculum and instructional practice can support success. Our case study districts showed that aligning performance assessments with other district initiatives, such as career and technical education, and centering them as integral to these initiatives, can ultimately help to propel and sustain their success. Furthermore, fostering alignment of the work across different district offices, such as curriculum/instruction and Linked Learning, can help to support effective implementation, especially in larger districts. This coherence can signal to teachers, students, and parents that they are invited to share in a vision of change for assessment that is integral to the teaching and learning that is happening in the district.

- **Recommendation for district leaders:** Ensure that district performance assessment initiatives are aligned with existing district curriculum, instruction, and assessment policies and are positioned as integral to teaching and learning in the district.

Lesson 4: Professional learning, on-site coaching, staff time, and policies that support implementation are needed to scale up performance assessment initiatives. In our case study districts, we found that offering high-quality professional learning opportunities and strong supports for teachers contributed to effective implementation of the performance assessment initiatives at scale. Districts and schools had success with supporting teachers when they offered ongoing professional learning opportunities focused on performance

assessments, when they made coaching available from central office staff and/or technical assistance providers, and when they allocated sufficient time and resources for teachers to coordinate logistics and mentor students. These supports are most effective when they are responsive to needs at different sites (for example, offering more intensive support in the early stages of implementation). Putting these kinds of tangible supports into place can show students, parents, and teachers that the performance assessment initiative is an important priority and has the capacity to succeed.

- **Recommendation for district leaders:** Develop an implementation strategy that includes strong supports for teachers, such as staff time for planning, coordinating, and mentoring students, as well as professional learning and coaching opportunities.

Lesson 5: To succeed, students need strong and equitable supports, including access to mentorship, peer supports, time to prepare, and exposure to curriculum that builds relevant skills. These supports are especially important in the early years of implementing a performance assessment initiative, when students are still learning about the process. In our case study districts, time to prepare for a culminating performance assessment could take the form of a stand-alone course devoted to supporting students through the process, opportunities to work independently and meet with mentors, or dedicated work time in content area or advisory classes. Providing these student supports requires creative approaches to organizing time and curriculum and, sometimes, an investment of funding at the school and/or district level to pay teachers and other school staff for the additional responsibilities that they may take on to support implementation at their sites (e.g., stipends or compensation for extra hours worked, additional staff positions). When allocating the resources of time, curriculum, and money, it is important to ensure that participating schools—and the students who attend them— have equitable access to these supports, including across different academic programs (e.g., International Baccalaureate), student demographic groups (including English learners and students with disabilities), and school sites.

- **Recommendation for district leaders:** Equitably allocate sufficient resources across academic programs, student demographic groups (including English learners and students with disabilities), and school sites to ensure that students have the support they need to successfully participate in the district performance assessment initiative.

Lesson 6: A performance assessment policy that balances teacher innovation with a shared districtwide vision and clear path to scaling up can increase access and success. Across the three districts, we found that a performance assessment policy can help to legitimize the work and to support consistent and effective implementation. The policy can take different forms, such as a board-approved, districtwide graduation requirement and/or graduate profile, or a requirement for schools opting in to a particular initiative. It is important to keep in mind the potential trade-offs involved with these different options. A more top-down approach may reach a larger number of students, but it may also result in pushback from students, parents, or teachers who do not yet understand or support the work. A more bottom-up approach that invites teachers or schools to opt in may build goodwill and encourage high-quality implementation, but it may also result in uneven access for students in classrooms or schools that do not choose to opt in. A successful policy for implementing a district performance assessment initiative will be neither a solely top-down nor bottom-up approach, but instead will balance a variety of district- and school-level efforts and will be highly collaborative in nature.

- **Recommendation for district leaders:** Enact a district policy in support of performance assessments that balances an opt-in, collaborative approach with centralized supports and eventual expectations for all students and schools to participate.

Lesson 7: A flexible approach that allows educators to create locally appropriate processes, while also providing resources to facilitate structured growth, can support the spread of performance assessments. Based on our case study districts, we found that it is important to harness the expertise of principals and teachers when implementing district performance assessment initiatives. When given flexibility, educators can find innovative ways to adapt the process to the needs of their students and school community, drawing upon their expertise and familiarity with students. At the same time, district leaders can and should maintain a focus on high-quality implementation of performance assessments by providing well-structured support and resources with a focus on continuous improvement. This can include improvement guidance (e.g., shared rubrics and professional learning opportunities) and guidelines for equitable implementation (e.g., suggested accommodations or modifications for students with disabilities or English learners) to support consistent and high-quality implementation across schools and student racial and ethnic groups.

- **Recommendation for district leaders:** Allow sufficient flexibility for schools to make the performance assessment process their own while also providing guardrails for quality and consistency across sites.

Lesson 8: State policy can be helpful for creating supportive conditions in which districts can implement performance assessment initiatives. The case study districts implemented their performance assessment initiatives within the context of California state policy. Relevant policies included educational standards, assessment approaches, and funding opportunities that were aligned to deeper learning competencies and emphasized hands-on learning and assessment through career and technical education. Promising policies that are currently underway or under consideration in California include the implementation of the Next Generation Science Standards, the development of the State Seal of Civic Engagement, the continued refinement of the College and Career Indicator as part of the school and district accountability system, and the decision to end the use of SAT and ACT scores in admissions decisions to the University of California system. State policy shifts can encourage and support district leaders to rethink their approach to instruction and assessment.

- **Recommendation for state policymakers:** Consider opportunities for state policy to support innovative performance assessment initiatives in local districts through educational standards, assessment and accountability approaches, and funding opportunities.

Conclusion

Students and teachers in this study reported multiple benefits from participating in performance assessments, and key conditions for implementation of these assessments included strong supports for both groups. Implementing district performance assessment initiatives is a complicated endeavor, and none of the three districts studied would claim to have all the answers. The value of this work can be found not just in the final outcome, but in the learning and growth that happens along the way.

Endnotes

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6. Unpublished data from Los Angeles Unified School District, Linked Learning Office (personal communication, 2019). This calculation only applies to Linked Learning pathways at the high school level. It excludes several Los Angeles Unified middle schools that have recently joined the initiative. It also excludes charter schools and optional schools (continuation and community day schools), since the Linked Learning Office does not support schools in these categories.

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12. Personal email with the Manager of Performance Assessments at Oakland Unified School District (2019, October 17).

13. Currently only Linked Learning sites are implementing the graduate capstone, which entails using the district rubrics and participating in professional learning sessions led by central office staff. However, Oakland Unified is moving toward wall-to-wall Linked Learning implementation of the graduate capstone in high schools. This means that district leaders hope that all students will eventually be enrolled in a Linked Learning pathway.

14. Unpublished data from Oakland Unified School District, Linked Learning Office (personal communication, 2018).

15. California Department of Education. (2019). *2018–19 enrollment by grade.* (Pasadena Unified Report 19-64881). DataQuest. https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqcensus/EnrGrdLevels.aspx?cds=1964881&agglevel=district&year=2018-19.

16. Unpublished data from Pasadena Unified School District, College and Career Academies Department (personal communication, 2017, January 31).

17. Career Academy Support Network. (2011, October). *Profile of the California Partnership Academies.* Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/hs/cpareport09.asp.

18. Unpublished data from Pasadena Unified School District, College and Career Academies Department (personal communication, 2020, January 23).

19. Pasadena Unified School District Board of Education. (2014). *BP 6146.1 High school graduation requirements.* Pasadena, CA: Pasadena Unified School District.

20. California Department of Education. (2019). *2018–19 four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate.* (Pasadena Unified Report 19-64881). DataQuest. https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqcensus/CohRate.aspx?agglevel=district&year=2018-19&cds=1964881.

21. Deeper learning competencies are defined as follows: (1) master core academic content, (2) think critically and solve complex problems, (3) work collaboratively, (4) communicate effectively, (5) learn how to learn, and (6) develop academic mindsets. William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. (2013). *Deeper learning defined.* Menlo Park, CA: Author.

22. Osher, D., Cantor, P., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. (2018). Drivers of human development: How relationships and context shape learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science, 24,* 6–36. DOI: 10.1080/10888691.2017.1398650.