

CALIFORNIA PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT COLLABORATIVE

August 2020 Newsletter

Policy Shifts in UC Assessment and Admissions

On May 21, the [UC Board of Regents](#) voted unanimously to make University of California campuses test-optional for admissions beginning in fall 2021 and to move to a test-blind approach by fall 2023. Test-blind, as determined by the Board of Regents, means that “students will still have the option of submitting a test score, but that score can only be considered for purposes such as course placement, certain scholarships, and eligibility for the statewide admissions guarantee.” The UC system is beginning to identify or develop a replacement assessment this summer. If there is no UC-backed replacement by fall 2025, the UC system will continue with this new plan, eliminating the use of the SAT and ACT in admissions for California students. See this [EdSource article](#) to learn more about this decision.

In addition, the California State University system has [suspended the use of SAT and ACT scores for admissions in 2021](#) in response to the current pandemic, without a plan to move to test-optional or test-blind in the longer term. The CSU decision follows [a nationwide trend](#) toward more test-optional practices in higher education admissions, both in response to the current pandemic and as part of a growing movement within higher education admissions. The University of San Diego also announced a new test-optional policy for students applying for the fall 2021 freshman class, which will be a permanent change.

Virtual Learning Updates

CPAC leaned into virtual events in the spring, providing opportunities to connect and make sense of the impact COVID-19 was having on our students, families, and

school communities. We also used virtual venues to share the powerful learning that students were still able to engage in, reflect on, and defend during distanced learning.

CPAC Community Hour

Several educators joined our May 7 CPAC “Community Hour” for an informal virtual meet-up resulting in new professional connections and discussion on both short- and long-term impacts of COVID-19. Instructional coach Nancy Le from the Linked Learning Office of the Los Angeles Unified School District shared how she and her team developed online professional development modules, and we heard from coaches and a classroom teacher about ways their school communities were supporting authentic virtual learning experiences. We learned that Mari Jones and her colleagues at Share Your Learning adapted toolkits for virtual learning, and about the [nationwide exhibition of student learning](#) that she and her colleagues organized on May 29. Participants shared their hope that this moment would help us reimagine education in significant ways—with more attention given to the importance of positive relationships, equity, and alternative assessments.

Virtual Learning Series

During May and June, CPAC hosted six events featuring student virtual defenses in a series titled “Defending Learning at a Distance.” Envision Learning Partners, the Learning Policy Institute, and the Linked Learning Alliance developed and facilitated these events to capture and share the in-the-moment adaptations that schools and districts made to continue their support of high-quality performance assessments during the “upside-down” spring wrought by COVID-19. Students in many CPAC-member schools and districts

found ways to virtually deliver portfolio defenses, senior (or “capstone”) project presentations, and other public exhibitions.

Nineteen students from six different schools across the state (East Palo Alto Academy, Impact Academy, June Jordan School for Equity, the School of Global Studies, STEM Academy of Boyle Heights, and STEM Academy of Hollywood) presented artifacts of their learning, evidence of their knowledge and skills, reflections on their development, next steps in their educational journeys, and ways they plan to continue to grow. In one Q&A session, a student presenter shared that his portfolio and defense was “more personal [than typical tests].” Another student reflected, “It opened my eyes to the opportunities that other kids don’t get.... I see that we do a lot more prep for our future than what my friends from elementary school get in high school.”

These sessions were designed to be small-group engagements with opportunities for dialogue with students and fellow participants. Over 100 adults participated in the six different sessions. Participants had a chance to experience virtual performance assessments, hear from students directly, and learn from one another.

LAUSD Professional Development

On June 16, over 150 educators from Los Angeles Unified School District participated in a 1-hour online session led by Jeannette LaFors. This session defined performance assessment; underscored its importance in the current context; and offered examples of academically rigorous, personally relevant projects that featured authentic demonstrations of students’ knowledge and skills. When asked what next steps session participants plan to take, one participant shared that they wanted to “adapt assessments for remote learning and reach out to community partners.” A highly fitting next step.

Reimagining College Access Webinars

The Reimagining College Access (RCA) initiative hosted a series of three webinars connecting performance assessments that drive deeper learning in k–12 with holistic college admissions, placement, and advising.

The first of these webinars, “[Using Performance Assessment in College Admissions](#),” occurred on May 27 and addressed the use of performance assessment for equitable admissions and college success. Linda Darling-Hammond of the Learning Policy Institute (LPI), Michelle Fine of the City University of New York (CUNY), and Joanna Kucharski of CUNY discussed a CUNY pilot program and a new LPI report, [Assessing College Readiness Through Authentic Student Work](#). The report examines the progress of students from the New York Performance Standards Consortium of high schools who were admitted through the pilot to one of the 12 CUNY universities. These students scored below CUNY’s college entrance exam cut score but showed promise based on the strength of other admissions materials they submitted and based on performance assessments—a new element included for consideration in admissions decisions in the pilot. If you would like to see a recording, you can view one [here](#).

On June 23, RCA hosted the second webinar in this series, “[Performance Assessment in College Admissions: How Students Show What They Know and Can Do](#).” Panelists Stu Schmill of MIT, Judy Purdy of Wheaton College, and Scott Anderson of the Common App discussed the use of performance assessment for equitable admissions and college success. At MIT, Schmill and his team use Maker Portfolios and performance assessment in the application and admissions review process. As part of the Reimagining College Access pilot, Purdy and her team included student work in their admissions application submissions and review this past year. Anderson discussed efforts by the Common App and its partner SlideRoom to expand the admissions application system or platform to enable students to submit performance assessments in order to more fully represent themselves in the admission process. If you would like to see a recording, you can view one [here](#).

The final webinar in the RCA series, "[Connecting K-12 and Higher Education Through the Use of Performance Assessments](#)," occurred on July 21. This webinar addressed why and how to align k-12 performance assessment systems for use in higher education decision-making for college access and success. Panelists David Hawkins (National Association for College Admission Counseling), Khalia Joseph (Internationals Network for Public Schools), and Chris White (High Tech High Graduate School of Education) explored how performance assessments can provide evidence of learning and center student identity in admissions, as well as how k-12 schools can align their systems to accommodate the needs of institutions of higher education and provide reliable information that the institutions need. If you would like to view a recording, you can find one [here](#).

Voices From the Field: Navigating the COVID-19 Crisis

We connected with nearly 40 students, more than a dozen teachers, six principals, and more than a dozen district staff—mostly from CPAC member schools and districts—to understand how students and staff responded to the challenges of COVID-19.

We heard about the precarious situations many students and their families experienced as COVID-19 threatened their health, security, and access to critical resources. We witnessed ways inequities among students and families magnified when students could no longer physically come to school. Educators made individual and collective efforts to deal with the upheaval, and we were especially appreciative of their honest and insightful reflections as they navigated the unsettling unknowns and rethought the core purpose of teaching and learning amid the present crisis.

Two things stood out from these conversations: the importance of strong and positive relationships to support the social-emotional and academic well-being of students, as well as a commitment to meaningful opportunities for students to demonstrate and reflect on their learning. Hillsdale High School in San Mateo, CA, provides an example of how this worked in practice.

Spotlight on Hillsdale High School, San Mateo Union High School District (CA)

As soon as the San Mateo Union High School District announced its last day of in-person school, the small learning communities (SLCs) within Hillsdale High School, known as "houses," quickly proved to be critical supports. Each Hillsdale house groups students and teachers into teams in which core academic teachers (English, math, science, and social studies) share common planning time to coordinate instruction, house activities, and student support. As part of the house structure, teachers "loop" with their students, teaching them for 2 years in a row as part of an advisory structure. This provides students with daily connection to an adult who attends to their well-being and academic growth and holds a relationship with their families.

Right after school closed, advisors reached out to their students. Advisors identified whether students needed support with food insecurity and/or financial hardship, technology for distance learning, mental health, motivation to stay engaged with school, or other specialized learning supports. Educators tracked student and family needs in real time and used this information to provide targeted responses while they worked nonstop to organize and implement online learning, enact new grading policies, close out the year, honor their graduating seniors, set up summer school, and hire teachers for the upcoming year.

Jeff Gilbert, Principal of Hillsdale High School and an advisor himself, remarked on the importance of houses and advisories, explaining, "The relationships are really, really strong.... I'm hearing over and over how thoughtful the [teaching] teams are being about approaching each student in a unique, individual way. And how deep the understanding is of the students we have in front of us."

On the instructional front, students and teachers faced major challenges and transitions. District leaders decided that online learning could not require students or teachers to attend classes on specific days or times, but would rather depend on teacher-posted content and assignments that students could access online and discuss with teachers during weekly office hours if needed. The shift from daily in-person, interactive lessons with discussion, dialogue, experiments, group work, projects, and live presentations to asynchronous instruction was dramatic. Teachers missed the daily connection with their students while acknowledging the equity arguments for asynchronous instruction. They adapted to the new normal with open-ended tasks that would reflect the ethos of the school culture and support students along a wide continuum of needs and skills.

This adaptation to distance learning took various forms. One house—Kyoto House for 9th- and 10th-grade students—created an online “hub” where its students could access information from all of their core academic classes in one place. Advisors from Kyoto House assigned students a COVID-19 journal with weekly writing assignments. Teachers tracked measures of student engagement through their learning management system, which informed their weekly staff meetings and helped them prioritize students to reach out to. If a student had not logged in for a couple of days in a row, for example, the student’s advisor might text or call the student to check in and offer support. A world language teacher successfully adapted in-class performance assessments, for which students recorded dialogues for feedback and evaluation. However, another group project proved challenging for him to facilitate without regular face-to-face time with students. Another teacher created a compelling optional assignment for students in which they documented the COVID-19 pandemic for future historians. Despite these innovations, many, if not most, of the projects, exhibitions, and defenses of learning planned for the spring were compromised.

Hillsdale’s anchoring assessment, a capstone project and in-person “defense of learning” presentation, proved challenging to continue when learning moved online. The leadership team discussed this project with students, advisors, and coaches, and ultimately decided to support individual students with the written component and scale back the presentation to an optional online exhibition. The projects show an impressive range of academic rigor, personal interest, and thoughtful reflection: One student depicted a teenager’s Japanese American internment experience through painted narrative, another shared his original play, and a third described an app she developed to simulate physics phenomena. You can hear from students and see artifacts of their learning [here](#).

Hillsdale illustrates ways that its guiding cornerstones (equity, personalization, rigor, and shared decision-making) have helped it navigate the immediate challenges that emerged from the pandemic. And its cornerstones continue to guide Hillsdale with how to best support its students as this upcoming academic year begins with distance learning.

As teachers and school leaders face the start of a new school year with distance learning requirements, we can reflect on two guiding questions that Hillsdale High School brought into high relief:

1. How can I continue to build relationships with students even if I’m not seeing them in person, or even every day?
2. How can I partner with students, fellow educators, and families to create opportunities for deep, meaningful learning and performance-based assessment even amid various constraints?

We would love to hear your reflections on these questions, and we look forward to spotlighting additional schools in future newsletters!

Additional Resources

Next Gen published a compelling [blog](#) titled “The Equity Imperative: Project-Based Distance Learning” by Young Whan Choi, Manager of Performance Assessments in the Oakland Unified School District. Choi features a project supported by the University of California’s Center for Cities and Schools that inspired students to keep developing their ideas for safer commutes to school despite the dramatic disruptions they experienced when COVID-19 forced schools to close.

Colleagues from the Linked Learning Alliance and Envision Learning Partners published [this piece](#) in June and [this one](#) in May that shine a spotlight on Pasadena Unified School District’s experience with virtual senior defenses this spring. According to the Linked Learning Alliance, “By transitioning their senior defenses to a virtual setting, students have an opportunity to close out their senior year with a meaningful and relevant moment of reflection before moving on to their post-secondary path.”

And Esther Soliman, Career and Technical Education and Linked Learning Administrator in the Los Angeles Unified School District, shares her observations and reflections in this [blog](#) about ways that students’ deeper learning experiences are documented and celebrated through electronic portfolios that students have been piloting this year. She quotes one student who presented her portfolio, who said, “We want people to see us as individuals and not numbers. My numbers are average, but I have grown so much and I have learned how to persevere.”

On May 29, 2020, nearly 150 educators responded to a [call to action](#) by Joe Truss, Principal of Visitacion Valley Middle School in San Francisco, and collaborated to create a nationwide exhibition of student learning. [This video](#) features five students’ reflections on how they continued with project-based learning during COVID-19. The students’ work is incredibly inspiring and provides a great model for us all. As one student shared, “To be a lifelong learner you have to be focused on your work while you’re cooped up in your house going berserk.” Additional student work is available in [this gallery](#). We hope that the student exhibitions bring you joy and inspiration!

Ruth Chung Wei of SCALE and Envision Learning Partners provides a helpful reminder in her recent [blog](#) that social and emotional learning (SEL) is foundational to all learning. Her research team authored a study that explores “the possibility of developing credible, instructionally-embedded sources of evidence about students’ SEL development that can be used to inform students’ and teachers’ next steps.” This research team also created a framework based on this research for developing and demonstrating SEL in the context of performance assessment. As the school year restarts, this research may be a useful resource for educators looking to integrate SEL as part of project-based learning or exhibitions of learning.



About CPAC

The California Performance Assessment Collaborative (CPAC) represents educators, policymakers, and researchers who are working to study and advance the use of authentic approaches to assessment, such as presentations, projects, and portfolios, which require students to demonstrate applied knowledge of content and use of [21st-century skills](#). To learn more about CPAC, check out the [CPAC website](#).