

Performance Assessment Profile: Oceana High School

By Anna Maier

Overview

Oceana High School, nestled in a green hillside overlooking the Pacific Ocean in Pacifica, CA, first opened in 1962 as a traditional comprehensive high school. In 1991, Oceana underwent a restructuring process with support from the district, teachers' union, and broader community. It reopened as a small school that offers an intimate college preparatory experience for students seeking an alternative education. Oceana is a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools, is accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, and has been recognized as a California Distinguished School and a California Gold Ribbon School.

The rigorous curriculum includes four years of humanities, 100 hours of community service, and a Senior Exhibition paper and presentation required for graduation. Through project-based learning and authentic assessments, students develop critical thinking skills and become lifelong learners. The curriculum also emphasizes the role that students will play as citizens of a democratic society and infuses social justice themes throughout the course of study. A system of shared leadership encourages the school community to participate in major academic and policy decisions through the Academic Council, composed of teachers, administrators, office staff, students, and parents.

Table 1: Oceana High School at a Glance (2015–16)

Student Enrollment	622
Race/Ethnicity	44% Asian, Filipino, or Pacific Islander 24% Latino 21% White 2% African American 9% Other
Low-Income Studentsⁱ	32%
English Learnersⁱⁱ	8%

ⁱ Percent of students who qualified for a free or reduced-price meal in 2014–15.

ⁱⁱ Does not include English Learners who have been reclassified as “fluent English proficient.”

Source: California Department of Education DataQuest.

Performance Assessment at Oceana High

Oceana's [Senior Exhibition](#) requires students to conduct and present research as a requirement for graduation. This process is designed to prepare students for the demands of college and career.

Work Products

In preparation for the Senior Exhibition, students select a research topic of interest and develop an Essential Question that they will seek to answer through an evidence-based analysis. For example, "Should the government regulate the price of prescription drugs?" or "Should California repeal its mandatory sentencing laws?" They then conduct research in order to answer their essential question, using primary documentation, academic studies, and expert interviews. This process culminates in a 15- to 30-page written research paper. The paper is divided into five smaller essays, which students draft individually and receive feedback on, before compiling them into the full paper.

1. Introduction: Explains why the essential question matters and highlights any controversies.
2. Context: Lays out unbiased background information that is necessary to understand the essential question.
3. Claim One: Provides an evidence-based answer or solution to the essential question.
4. Claim Two: Provides an alternative evidence-based answer or solution to the essential question that is exclusive of Claim One.
5. Conclusion: Summarizes the key takeaways from the student's research and his or her recommended course of action to address the Essential Question.

Students must receive a passing score on the paper in order to graduate. After completing the paper, they spend about six weeks preparing to present their work, as discussed below.

Presentations

Senior Exhibition Day, the culmination of the yearlong research process, is both a celebration and a final challenge for 12th-graders at Oceana. The normal class schedule is put on hold as students present their work to an audience of peers, friends, family members, and teachers. Each session lasts for about one hour, which includes a 20- to 30-minute presentation, a question-and-answer period involving the entire audience, a private evaluation discussion between the two adults scoring the presentation, and the sharing of final results with the presenter. Oceana students in 9th through 11th grades sign up to attend a different presentation each class period, based on their interest. The student's mentor teacher pairs up with a community evaluator (a former student, parent or teacher, or an interested local volunteer) to score the presentation. Community evaluators play an important role on Senior Exhibition day. They volunteer to attend one or more student presentations, scoring a maximum of six presentations in one day. According to school staff, many volunteers become deeply involved with the event and return on an annual basis.

What is a Senior Exhibition Presentation Like?

The 12th grade student stands at the front of the room, ready to share the Senior Exhibition paper that he has worked on for an entire year. His presentation will address the essential question that served as the focus of his research: “Should we abolish the Federal Reserve?” In preparation for this moment, he has spent many hours analyzing studies, books, and newspaper articles, interviewing experts, meeting with his teachers for feedback, and drafting and revising his work. Now he will present the fruits of his labor, and defend his analysis in a question-and-answer session following his talk.

The room buzzes with excited energy for the student, who is dressed up in a suit and tie for the big occasion. His family fills up two tables, and many friends are there to support him as well. The student’s mentor teacher, who has provided him with support and graded his work throughout the year, starts off with an introduction. She shares that he has been a pleasure to work with, and she can’t wait for him to share his hard work with everyone.

As the lights dim and the student’s presentation lights up the projector screen, the crowd is fully engaged. The presenter starts off with a sarcastic joke: “Who here loves banking? I know, you all eat, sleep, and drink it. Really, it’s boring. I get it. But we can’t escape the importance of this topic.” The audience laughs. The student is now off to the races as he makes an impassioned case for why the United States should fix, rather than abolish, the Federal Reserve. He has done his research, and as he continues on his confidence grows. He shares information about why the Federal Reserve was created and what it does. He also acknowledges problems with how the institution is currently run and explains why he still views it as integral to the U.S. economic system. He then presents his analysis of what could be done to address the problems he found, arguing that it may be helpful to limit the extent to which the Federal Reserve can bail out failing companies and that Congress should provide more oversight.

By the time he is finished, the other students in the room have formulated a number of questions about the Federal Reserve—a topic that most have never heard of before. The student’s mentor teacher and a community volunteer ask a number of questions to probe the depth of his understanding. The student answers each question confidently. Everyone in the audience, the adults included, agrees that they have learned something new. It is a proud moment for the student, who is able to see a year’s worth of hard work pay off.

Source: Site visit to Oceana High School

Grading

Oceana High School has defined **schoolwide outcomes** for graduating students, who will be:

- Communicators, skilled in reading, writing, listening, and speaking
- Problem solvers and self-directed learners
- Creative, reflective, and critical thinkers
- Cooperative workers
- Respectful and responsible citizens

The Senior Exhibition process supports these outcomes, although they are not explicitly incorporated into the two rubrics used to score the Senior Exhibition. For the [research paper rubric](#), the student’s mentor teacher, who has provided feedback and support throughout the process, assigns a score of “revisit” (does not meet standards, must revise the paper), 1 (approaching), 2 (proficient), or 3 (advanced) for each of the following areas:

- Introduction
- Context
- Claims One and Two
- Conclusion
- Interview Research
- Library and Internet Research
- Organization of Paper
- Format and Grammar Usage
- Communication with Mentor Teacher

Here is an example of different scoring levels for the Context domain:

	Revisit	1 (Approaching)	2 (Proficient)	3 (Advanced)
<p>Context:</p> <p>To what extent does the student provide unbiased background information to frame the essential question that his/her paper addresses?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facts are not relevant • Information is not relevant for the audience • Inadequate foundation for the controversy [that the research paper addresses] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses an understanding of audience to select relevant facts • Explains necessary terminology and key aspects [of the essential question] to lay a foundation for the controversy [that the research paper addresses] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses a focused understanding of audience to select significant and relevant facts • Explains necessary terminology and key aspects [of the essential question] to lay a clear foundation for the controversy [that the research paper addresses] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses an accurate understanding of the audience to carefully select significant and relevant facts • Clearly explains necessary terminology and key aspects [of the essential question] to lay a thorough foundation for the controversy [that the research paper addresses]

Similarly, for the Senior Exhibition presentation, the student’s mentor teacher and a community volunteer use a shared [presentation rubric](#) for evaluation. They assign a score of revisit (does not meet standards, must present again), 1 (approaching), 2 (proficient), or 3 (advanced) for each of the following areas:

- Introduction of Essential Question
- Organization of Presentation
- Quality of Information
- Visual Aids
- Use of Reasoning
- Voice (volume and pacing)
- Rapport (eye contact and body language)
- Questions and Answers

Here is an example of different scoring levels for the Reasoning domain:

	Revisit	1 (Approaching)	2 (Proficient)	3 (Advanced)
Reasoning: To what extent does the student present a persuasive argument in his/her presentation?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connection between answer to the essential question and evidence is not clear • Does not explain credibility of the evidence • Does not present any counterclaim(s) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses evidence to answer the essential question • Clearly explains credibility of some of the evidence • Presents and attempts to rebut counterclaim(s) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly uses evidence to prove answer to the essential question • Clearly explains credibility of most of the crucial evidence • Presents and rebuts counterclaim(s) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Argues evidence in a compelling manner to prove answer to the essential question • Clearly explains credibility of all of the crucial evidence • Clearly presents and effectively rebuts counterclaim(s)

Students who receive top scores on both the paper and presentation are deemed “meritorious.” This means that the student worked well above the required standard throughout the Senior Exhibition project (averaging between a 2 and a 3 on the rubric, for a minimum of 45 out of 51 possible points) on both the paper and the presentation. Meritorious students cannot have a low score (a “revisit” or score of 1 on the rubric) for any element of the project. Students who receive this distinction get a special pin, and they are recognized at the graduation ceremony each year.

Revising

Students who receive a “revisit” on any category of the Senior Exhibition paper rubric must continue to revise until they meet the minimum standard for all categories. They receive support from their mentor teacher and humanities teacher during this process. While this process is rigorous, a student describes how it can also be rewarding:

I had all revisits on my first draft, and that killed me because I am not a bad writer. It definitely sucked. There’s no other way to say it. But with the help of my mentor and humanities teacher, they both told me that this doesn’t mean to stop, but it means to keep trying. I kept trying and put together a great paper that I feel killed it in all aspects.

Similarly, students who receive a “revisit” on any category of the Senior Exhibition presentation rubric must present again at a later date. Rather than reassembling a full crowd of peers, family, and a community evaluator, the student presents to his/her mentor teacher, another teacher, and any friends or family whom he/she wishes to invite. The second presentation takes place after school in a more private setting. Again, the mentor teacher and humanities teacher work with the student one-on-one to help him/her prepare to revisit the presentation. Very few students typically fail their first try. In 2015–16, less than five students failed on either project. When they encounter this obstacle, the students may feel disappointed, but they receive substantial support to make sure they are prepared to revisit their presentation.

School Instruction and Support

When Oceana High School went through the small-school redesign process, a number of school structures were put into place to support the new emphasis on project-based learning and authentic assessment. For example, Oceana uses a block schedule, where students attend fewer classes per day, and each class period is longer. To accommodate this, students attend each class several days per week rather than every day. The California Department of Education has also awarded Oceana an alternative school designation, which includes a time waiver on instructional minutes. This allows students to leave early on Wednesdays to perform community service and gives faculty weekly collaboration time. Teachers use this time to review student data, and collaborate on common assessments and teaching practices. In order to maintain this waiver, Oceana submits an annual report and a biannual renewal application to the state—a request that has been granted for each application dating back to 1991. Finally, the school’s governance structure includes an Academic Council composed of five elected teachers, the principal, a clerical representative, students, and a parent representative. The Council participates in all major academic and policy decisions, including matters pertaining to performance assessment.

Student support includes a small-group advisory class that focuses on relationship building, and allows time for students to work on homework and projects in a supportive environment. Advisory enables students to have at least one adult at the school who knows them well and supports them through their four years at Oceana. The advisor makes sure his/her students are meeting graduation and college requirements, and offers other help as needed.

For Senior Exhibition, Oceana has several specific supports put in place to facilitate student success. First of all, students complete a smaller exhibition-style research projects in 10th and 11th grades to develop their skills and build their confidence. For the [10th-grade project](#), all students focus on the same essential question, such as “In what ways are human rights being violated in the world today?

Why do these abuses continue to take place?” Students address this question through a research paper, an accompanying class presentation, and a “resistance and advocacy project” that includes a visual art project, an artist statement, a written topic brief, and a mini presentation for family, friends, and community members who attend the Sophomore Exhibition night. The [11th-grade project](#) closely mirrors the Senior Exhibition, in that students develop their own essential question and write a research paper that they present. The demands are somewhat pared down—the paper is shorter, students are required to identify fewer resources, they only interview one expert, and they present to a smaller audience. However, the 11th-grade project still provides a rigorous learning experience and prepares students well for the demands of 12th grade.

For the Senior Exhibition project, students have time to work on their research paper during their 12th grade humanities class, where they receive support and guidance in conducting research and drafting. Oceana teachers also serve as mentors for a group of three to five students—and students select their mentors. Mentor teachers devote an enormous amount of time to supporting their mentees. They meet regularly with each student outside of school hours to guide their research, critique and grade their work, and provide encouragement. The devotion of Oceana’s staff ensures that the performance assessment system works well and that students receive the support they need. As one student explains:

The biggest piece of advice I would give to incoming seniors is to keep talking to your mentor. There might be parts of this project that seem too big or too confusing. But the reason your mentor is there is to help you work through these difficult parts.

Scoring Calibration

The Senior Exhibition presentation is purposefully graded by two adults using the same rubric. One, the mentor teacher, has worked with the student closely and knows him/her well. The other, the community evaluator, does not know the student or topic, and can provide a fresh and perhaps more objective assessment of the presentation. This dual-scoring system is purposeful, with the two adults stepping outside for a private discussion before settling on a presentation grade. During this time, the mentor teacher and community evaluator review any areas of disagreement, and cite evidence to support their opinion until they are able to come to a consensus. Sometimes this is easier than others. As one community evaluator notes:

I've seen a lot of these presentations over the years, and when a student nails it, they nail it. It's very impressive.

On the other hand, a mentor teacher observes:

We have these rubrics, but we're still our own subjective people. I think my students might sometimes score higher with another teacher, because I push them hard to do their best—I'm a tough grader.

The effort to align scoring fairly across teachers and community evaluators is an ongoing process that requires continual fine-tuning. Before this “on the fly” scoring calibration occurs during student presentations, community evaluators receive substantial training to ensure that they will score students consistently and fairly. Each volunteer attends a 2.5-hour training, where he or she watches a video of a student presentation and practice scoring with a rubric. The training also covers appropriate expectations for 12th-grade-level work and how to provide feedback in a manner that is rigorous but not overly harsh.

Oceana teachers engage in discussions about how to equitably score student papers and presentations during staff meetings. They spend time discussing tasks, assignments, and prompts to deepen their understanding of what students are expected to do. Student work samples, including recent assignments and videotaped presentations, ground the conversation as staff members discuss what they are seeing and align their assessment of where the work falls on the rubric.

How Students Benefit

While the Senior Exhibition process is one of many elements driving student success at Oceana, it plays a central role in preparing students for college and beyond. The results of Oceana's academic program are impressive, although it is important to note that there is room for improvement with graduation outcomes for the small number of African-American students at Oceana.

Table 2: Oceana High School Student Outcomes

	Oceana High	State Average
California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress 2015–16	11th Grade ELA:	11th Grade ELA:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 81% standard met or exceeded • 15% standard nearly met • 4% standard not met 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 59% standard met or exceeded • 22% standard nearly met • 19% standard not met
	11th Grade Math:	11th Grade Math:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 52% standard met or exceeded • 22% standard nearly met • 26% standard not met 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 33% standard met or exceeded • 25% standard nearly met • 43% standard not met
Four-Year Cohort Graduation Rate 2014–15	91%	82%
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asian, Filipino, or Pacific Islander: 92% • Latino: 91% • White: 88% • African American: 67%ⁱ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asian, Filipino, or Pacific Islander: 92% • Latino: 79% • White: 88% • African American: 71%
A–G Course Requirements for UC/CSU Admission 2014–15	62%	43%
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asian, Filipino, or Pacific Islander: 72% • Latino: 36% • White: 81% • African American: 0%ⁱ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asian, Filipino, or Pacific Islander: 67% • Latino: 35% • White: 50% • African American: 33%

ⁱ Ten or fewer students

Source: California Department of Education DataQuest.

For many students, Oceana’s Senior Exhibition is an empowering experience. They choose a research topic that interests them, and select a mentor teacher they trust and respect. They receive one-on-one coaching and support throughout the process. They also learn about the importance of time management and organization for large projects, a skill that will serve them well in college. One student reflects:

Senior Exhibition is not as frightening as it seems. A 15-page essay and a 20-minute presentation are completely doable if you keep up with all deadlines and turn in quality work.

At its best, the Senior Exhibition can be life-changing. One teacher explained that her mentee, who selected school integration as her topic, conducted an interview with Dr. Jeff Duncan-Andrade, Associate Professor of Raza Studies and Education Administration at San Francisco State University, and a high school English teacher in Oakland. The student had a deep conversation with Dr. Duncan-Andrade about the importance of ethnic studies programs, which her mentor characterized as a

“transformative, spiritual, affirming experience.” Through this conversation, the student became inspired to take ethnic studies classes in college and discovered a new passion for this aspect of education policy.

A 12th-grade student asserts:

Senior Exhibition taught me how to write a good paper, how to streamline information, how to be persuasive, how to conduct a proper interview, how to be more professional, how to present to strangers, and how to be a better speaker. I think all of this will help with my future, both for college and for work.¹

An Oceana graduate found that the Senior Exhibition prepared her well for future success:

The whole process was a lot of work and time consuming. It took a lot of discipline and management. It took some bravery, too. Senior Exhibition asks things of a 17-year-old that I think average 17-year-olds don't do. But in hindsight ... I am so grateful I had that experience because later in my life, I've said, "Oh this? I did this before in high school," more than once.²

Oceana's Senior Exhibition model prepares students to think critically about complicated and important social issues, gather evidence to form their own opinions, and confidently present and defend their thinking to others. These skills are valuable in both a college and workplace setting, and leave students well-equipped to succeed upon graduating from Oceana.

1 Bartlett, Jean (2015, April 7). Oceana student reflects on Senior Exhibition. *Mercury News*. <http://www.mercurynews.com/2015/04/07/oceana-student-reflects-on-senior-exhibition/>.

2 Bartlett, Jean (2012, October 25). Two alumni reminisce about Oceana High School, which turns 50. *Mercury News*. <http://www.mercurynews.com/2012/10/25/two-alumni-reminisce-about-oceana-high-school-which-turns-50/>.