

Building a School Culture of Performance



By Bruce H. Crowder, EdD

Let me begin by putting forth the proverbial question: “How do you get to Carnegie Hall?” Stated another way: How do we get our students to Carnegie Hall?

Culture is typically defined as the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols of a group. Its influence is so powerful that those affected by it behave without thinking about it.

DEFINITIONS

A school culture of performance is defined as an institution that supports and prizes the importance of constant opportunity of doing what is valued.

Education is grounded in the value of performance. If you want a student to write or reason, then the student needs many and varied opportunities to do so.

CURRENT STATUS

Our schools are in the midst of a performance quandary. State testing results have barely moved since the first round of Common Core testing in 2013. There are a number of events and actions that impacted teaching and learning during this period, beginning with the advent of APPR, which has sucked most of the oxygen out of our schools. Time for making the curricular shifts for English language arts and mathematics to address new levels of rigor is diminished. While teacher observations, test scores, and student learning objectives (SLOs) dominate the school landscape, the need for a new curriculum withers. Aside from school safety, student learning and growth, based on NYS standards, are the primary targets and that is not happening.

It is a dark day in education when tangential elements of education take over, and its essence is left further in the dark. Earnest attempts to supplant district curricula with state-sponsored curriculum have done little to help the improvement of student performance. This is particularly evident when examining the results of student performance test items (i.e., short and extended responses) on grades 3-8 ELA and math tests. Educators were told to expect low results with the advent of Common Core Learning Standards. That was yesterday. Today, little has changed. Why might this be so? What may be done to change it?

SHIFTING TO A NEW STATUS OF PERFORMANCE

The movement out of the old into the new demands time for study and development. New expectations and actions often take years to fully implement without interference. We have the school leaders and teachers to achieve a new status for performance.

Now we need the time to begin the shift.

A CURRICULUM OF PERFORMANCE

It should begin with a performance-based curriculum in which learning and doing reside squarely at the heart of it. New standards provide the platform from which to launch a new curriculum. They set both vertical and horizontal articulation. When speaking about a new curriculum, this is not to imply that schools *throw the baby out with the bath water*. Rather, keep what is valuable, and embed what is needed and missing. While textbook publishers are trying to keep up with new expectations and changes, their products may not be perfect. In all likelihood, no textbook will ever be perfect. However, nothing prevents educators from using a textbook as a valuable resource while inserting additional dimensions to the course of study under development. Many of the topical and thematic units developed in the past still contain the potential to influence higher performance with appropriate modification. Units of this nature often contain fiction and nonfiction texts that support the rigor exhibited in the new standards. So, the rule for selection of content for ELA and math must address its potential for rigor.

RIGOR OF PERFORMANCE

It is good to see professional learning options for principals and teachers that introduce them to Webb's Depth of Knowledge (DOK).¹ This is an important tool in analyzing the cognitive demand (complexity) associated with the standards, curricular tasks, and assessment items. Webb's model creates a new taxonomy of the cognitive domain with four levels, rather than the Bloom's taxonomy, which contains many more.

DOK Level - Title of Level

- 1 - Recall and Reproduction
- 2 - Skills and Concepts
- 3 - Short-term Strategic Thinking
- 4 - Extended Thinking

Researching DOK produces a wealth of information for application. More than anything, it raises the

awareness of the nature and complexity of performance.

NEW FOCUS ON TESTING

Perhaps the most abused term in education is *testing*. Something about it quickly arouses a degree of anger and resentment. Often it is thought to be something we do to our students on Friday, and on Monday we survey the damage. Or today in New York State it is something that we do to our principals and teachers. Testing without adequate preparation is harmful and ludicrous. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy. We must leave behind this kind of thinking and put testing into a new perspective. First of all, the need to measure acquisition of knowledge and skills may only be accomplished through communication and demonstration. More so, that demonstration must be at the center of a curriculum of performance. A true test is one that is directly tied to student learning and performance and is embedded within the blocks of learning that reside at critical points throughout the school year. Moreover, student performances within the curriculum need to reflect the type and nature of tests that students will encounter.

A review of NYS testing reveals new test designs. From a performance perspective, the new tests present a clear challenge for teachers and students. For example, constructive responses, based on a two-point scoring rubric, continue to show a state average of about 1.0. Reflection on the scoring of these items makes it quite clear that students do not know how to respond appropriately. These are test items that may be answered in as few as three sentences. At the heart of these items is the need to understand inferencing. An inference and two details from the text written in complete sentences are all that is required. The research on inferencing makes clear the need to teach it. It cannot be learned through exposure. However, where in the curriculum will inferencing performances reside and how often will students perform this task? The same is true of the extended response item, often called the essay. From fourth grade

on, students are expected to write a comparative response that references two passages. The link may focus on a common theme or other shared literary element. Where in the curriculum will students have the opportunity to perform such a task, at what level (DOK), and how often? Similar challenges are associated with math.

Our educators have the will to move their schools to a level of performance that honors their work and the performance capability of their students. Their designed curriculum needs to reflect this power of performance. Study the type and nature of the new tests. Put scoring rubrics into the hands of students for the purposes of understanding and application. Students need to reflect on self, problem (task), and learning. Do not subordinate process to content, engagement to coverage. Learning is active. So, centrally engage students to personally involve them. In addition, do not take over the problem (task) and ask students to simply learn the

result. Students learn what they care about, and they remember what they understand. Create an environment in which students learn to work. Also, learning should require students to withstand confusion and disturbance. You cannot teach anyone anything without engagement and reflection!

Performing well has the positive effect of inspiring performers to do better. If you want to be a good athlete, think like one and bring that thinking into all things you do. In education, it is critical for students to acknowledge where they are and where they want to be on a performance scale. They need to see it to change it. Performance is cumulative and should be recorded as the basis for determining next steps on the way to perfection. As the poet Robert Browning said, "Man's reach should exceed his grasp..." In other words, shoot for the stars. Our students need to know that what is expected of them in their current grades in school will stay before them as they move to the next grade. The

new expectations run from elementary into middle and high school, and beyond.

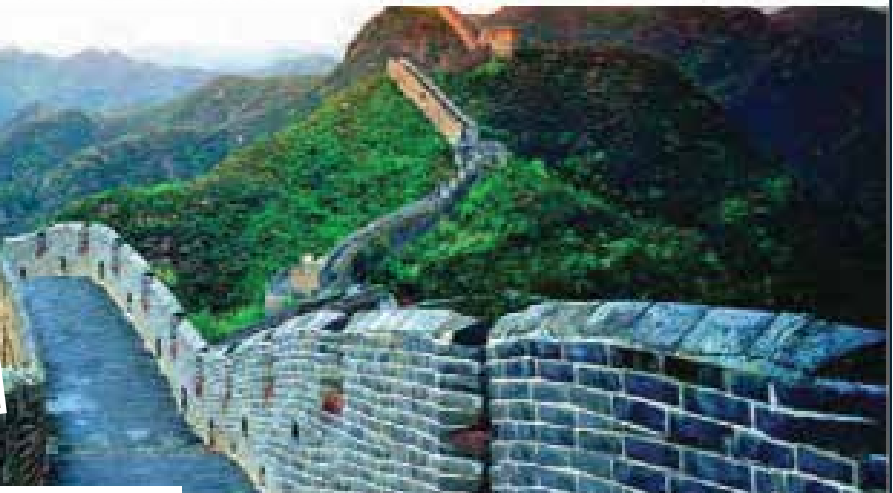
There are indications that the current environment of education in NYS may change. Nonetheless, the importance of teaching and learning in an era of high expectations will not. Good educators are good students. So, when faced with new and greater challenges, they must study them and all their aspects to gain insight, understanding, and application for greater performance. More than anything, celebrate performance – every aspect of it.

¹Webb, N. (March 28, 2002) "Depth-of-Knowledge Levels for four content areas," unpublished paper.

DR. BRUCE H. CROWDER is a senior researcher for Educational Vistas, Inc. He is a former NYS assistant commissioner for Quality Assurance and the Education and Accountability Program (EAP). Dr. Crowder may be reached at bcrowder@edvistas.com.

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