hundreds of teachers have chosen to remain in the profession because of the responsibility and respect they have gained as Consortium teachers.

Consortium students include a larger percentage of minority and low-income students than the overall New York City public school population. Although they begin school with lower academic achievement, they graduate from Consortium schools and attend college at higher percentages. For example, the graduation rate of black students from Consortium schools is 74.7 percent, compared with 63.8 percent for all New York City public schools. For Latino students, the graduation rate from Consortium schools is also higher than the rate from all New York City public schools: 71.2 percent compared with 61.4 percent.11

Additionally, Consortium schools graduate twice as many special education students as New York City public schools and nearly double the number of English language learners. The four-year Consortium graduation rate for English language learners is 70.9 percent, compared with New York City’s rate of 37.3 percent.

And, compared with the larger public school system, Consortium schools boast higher college acceptance and persistence rates for all students and for students of color: 83.8 percent of the Consortium’s black graduating seniors and 88.3 percent of Latino graduating seniors are accepted into colleges, compared with national rates of 37 percent and 42 percent, respectively.12

Consortium teachers engage in a variety of tasks that are critical to a performance-based assessment system. They design challenging curricula and tasks, respond to student interests and needs, develop and revise rubrics, and participate in extensive Consortium- and school-based professional development. Collaboration is extensive, from observing each other’s classrooms to visiting each other’s schools and serving as external evaluators for performance-based assessments, sharing curricula, and evaluating each other’s work at the annual moderation studies.

The very nature of these schools enables Consortium teachers to teach differently; they strive to cultivate a learning environment in which student voices play a critical role. Instead of scripting predetermined questions and answers in the manner of some lesson plans, they learn to ask open-ended questions and respond to students’ answers, turning them into new ques-

Consortium schools boast higher college acceptance and persistence rates for all students and for students of color.

Learning on Display

BY ANYA KAMENETZ

On a cloudy afternoon in January, I am sitting in a coffee shop near Hunter College waiting for a 17-year-old girl named Micaela Beigel, a student at a New York City public school called Urban Academy Laboratory High School. We have never met before, but I am here to pass judgment on one of her most important qualifications for high school graduation.

Beigel is tall and round-faced with a tiny, glittering nose stud. She introduces herself forthrightly with none of the diffidence of your stereotypical teen. She is toting a copy of Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice, heavily marked up and leafed with Post-It notes. I’ve been asked to reread the book too.

For the next 45 minutes, we discuss the novel—as a character study of Lizzy Bennet, as a portrait of female friendship, as a model of marriage, as a reflection on women’s changing roles, as the basis for centuries of adaptations and related works. Beigel’s ideas are more sophisticated than those of many college graduates I’ve met. She challenges a simplistic feminist critique that I put forward, referring to another class she’s taken on images of women in Disney: “Just saying that Pride and Prejudice correlates with the marriage structure doesn’t mean that’s the only thing it’s about. It’s like the Little Mermaid: yes, she trades her voice to get a man, but she’s also struggling with identity, growing up, self-confidence, determination. You need to look at all the things that come out of the story.”

Urban Academy is a member of the New York Performance Standards Consortium, a group of 38 public high schools across New York state that have been thriving for more than two decades with performance assessments. The Consortium’s model is now spreading across the country, in part because of the standardized testing backlash.

Instead of cramming for tests, students like Beigel learn in order to do things. They complete tasks designed to correspond as closely as possible to the work that artists, scientists, researchers, and other professionals do in the real world. To graduate, Urban Academy students must present a literary essay, a social studies research paper, a science experiment, and an application of higher-level mathematics.

Within reason, students can choose topics that interest them. Besides discussing Pride and Prejudice with me, Beigel did her “criticism proficiency” on a Roman Vishniac retrospective at the International Center of Photography, for which she interviewed attendees and led a discussion and Q&A with her classmates on the power of media.

Anya Kamenetz is the lead education blogger at National Public Radio. This article is excerpted from her book The Test: Why Our Schools Are Obsessed with Standardized Testing—but You Don’t Have to Be, available from PublicAffairs, a member of the Perseus Books Group. Copyright © 2014. The paperback edition of The Test has recently been released (January 2016).
The executive director of the Consortium, I got here. After interviewing Ann Cook, experts, and other professionals. That’s how who haven’t taught the students, academic fellow students, teachers from other schools in the world. Students get feedback from all college. “She’ll start in the fall at Goucher.” She used to feel bad about reading for fun. “I rediscovered why I like learning—I explore new things and create,” Beigel told me. “I observed the performance assessment process up close, and said I was perfectly qualified to be an English evaluator.” Since 1865, the New York State Board of Regents has offered a set of subject-area examinations. In 2000, the state rewrote the exams and standards and required all students to pass at least five Regents exams, making the Regents diploma, once a kind of honors diploma, mandatory for all students. “Once Regents exams became high stakes, test prep became the curriculum,” said Cook. She saw public schools that catered to diverse needs and interests, like vocational and technical education or the arts, disappearing, victims of the single standard of success. She was part of a group of high school leaders across the state interested in other ways of assessing student work. “When the Regents started on the standards kick, we got really serious and organized the Consortium formally,” receiving waivers from the state to use performance-based assessments in lieu of exams. The Consortium’s website is emblazoned with the tag line, “The alternative to high-stakes testing.” “I’m a terrible test taker,” said Beigel of the Regents. “A week of three-hour exams? It’s the worst situation ever.” Performance learning allows students an unusual level of personalization and autonomy. This model at first seems shockingly subjective, especially if you’ve been spending your days looking at percentiles and proficiency scores. I know that leading up to our chat, Beigel read the novel several times over three semesters, watched many adaptations, and worked intensively with an academic mentor trained and experienced in giving her feedback. But as an outside evaluator, I sign off on a rubric and dash off my impressions of Beigel’s performance to her teacher, Sheila Kosoff, more or less as set forth here, and that’s that. On reflection, I realize, as Walter Lippmann reminded his readers in 1926, that multiple-choice tests offer no more than the illusion of precision. By contrast, performance tasks put human judgment back into the equation. The process reflects the real world, where rubrics don’t hold much sway either. At crucial points in life—job interviews, work presentations, cocktail parties—everyone is going to have to convince a stranger that they know their stuff. And Beigel clearly did.