

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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup>

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

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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-

## 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

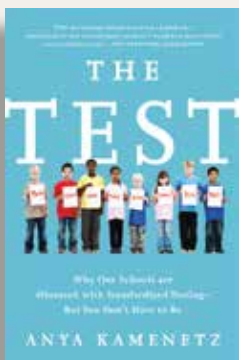
herself forthrightly with none of the diffidence of your stereotypical teen. She is toting a copy of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, heavily marked up and leafed with Post-It notes. I've been asked to reread the book too.

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).*



**Consortium schools encourage field trips to enhance learning. Left, Urban Academy students inspect sculptures in New York City's Battery Park.**

work of locating and presenting additional materials and sources for students' consideration.

The PBATs complete this work. They give teachers a much more comprehensive picture of a student's strengths and weaknesses and overall achievement.

The teacher can then understand the student as a reader, a writer, and a thinker in ways that teaching focused on preparing students for high-stakes tests does not allow.

To support their growth as professionals, Consortium teachers spend considerable time collaborating with colleagues, observing each other's teaching, discussing students, developing and critiquing an ever-expanding curriculum, and planning other joint work, such as team-taught courses and schoolwide projects.

The Consortium schools also participate in monthly workshops in which teachers from different schools exchange ideas about materials, methodology, student work, and challenges they face. These workshops currently include curriculum and teaching seminars in the four major disciplines (literature, social studies, science, and mathematics); a new school-mentoring project; a union representatives' political education committee; a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer curriculum group; a special education group; and a college advisory counselors' group. Through this work, the Consortium is creating a network where teachers can learn from each other to enhance their knowledge and skills.

tions, if necessary. They encourage students to explain their answers with support and to expand on them with evidence.

Moreover, in developing assignments and working with students to create performance assessments, Consortium teachers engage in intellectual work that parallels the work they demand of their students. Teachers routinely engage in the scholarly

She wrote an argumentative paper on culpability in the My Lai massacre and a critique comparing the book and film versions of *A Clockwork Orange*, and she is putting together a book of photographs she took at her upstate summer camp. For her science requirement, she took a class at Hunter College and conducted a psychological study of people's attitudes toward book and movie genres, applying basic statistical concepts such as correlation.

Beigel struggled in her previous, high-pressure school. After transferring, she flourished at Urban Academy, which allowed her to lean into her passions. "This is an alternative system where I get to explore new things and create," Beigel told me. "I rediscovered why I like learning—I used to feel bad about reading for fun." And, not for nothing, "I got into a good college." She'll start in the fall at Goucher.

Performance schools are wide open to the world. Students get feedback from all directions. They present their work to fellow students, teachers from other schools who haven't taught the students, academic experts, and other professionals. That's how I got here. After interviewing Ann Cook, the executive director of the Consortium, I

asked whether there was any way to observe the performance assessment process up close, and she 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.