



THE PRIZE *for* **Solution-Driven Unionism**

New York Performance Standards Consortium

For many school districts across the country, high-stakes assessment systems have led to a curriculum driven by tests, with some schools spending as much as a full month of class time each year preparing students for standardized exams. The result has been a loss of instructional time and a narrowing of the subjects students are exposed to, as educators are forced to devote instructional time to test preparation.

But for nearly 20 years, educators involved in the New York Performance Standards Consortium have pursued a different path. The consortium is a network of 39 diverse high schools. Thirty seven are in New York City, one is in Rochester, and one is in Ithaca. These schools have developed their own “performance assessments.” As in college courses, assessments grow directly from the curriculum and serve as an extension of the learning process. These assessments ask students to think deeply and show evidence—skills the Common Core State Standards also aim to produce.

“Our initial mission and responsibility was to get kids ready for college,” says Phyllis Tashlik, director of the consortium’s Center for Inquiry. “Years ago, nobody was talking about that. All they were talking about was passing Regents exams and getting graduation rates up. Whether kids were really learning or not was not the focus. The consortium’s focus has always been on teaching and learning, preparing to get our kids into college and to stay in college.”

The consortium schools are staffed by unionized teachers, many of whom have been actively involved with New York City’s United Federation of Teachers in

analyzing the harm that high-stakes testing causes to students’ access to a broad curriculum and to teachers’ professionalism. In consortium schools, union members find a voice in school policies and practices, and a sense of ownership regarding what is taught. As a result, 85 percent of consortium teachers remain in their schools, compared with only 42 percent of teachers in regular New York City schools.

As committed union members, teachers in consortium schools have designed and led workshops for other educators and have made courses certified as “college preparatory” by the New York City Department of Education available to other faculties online and through workshops.

STUDENTS READ, WRITE, ANALYZE AND PERFORM

The consortium schools focus on intensive reading, writing and discussion; open-ended questioning; and student input. Students must also defend their work orally before external evaluators in order to graduate. The result is a student population better prepared to succeed in college and an environment where teachers and students know their voices are valued.

Significantly, the consortium schools received a waiver from New York state from four of New York’s five standardized high school exams required for graduation; students still take the Regents English test. The freedom from the demands of the state tests has allowed consortium teachers to design tasks that ask students to show their mastery of academic subjects by writing analytically about literature, solving math

problems and explaining their answers, writing research papers on historical topics or current events, conducting science experiments and the like.

For example, a literature task asks:

In his essay, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," Chinua Achebe argues that Conrad is a "bloody racist." Based on the ideas made explicit in his essay and those implicit in Conrad's novel, do you agree or disagree with Achebe's argument? Is the real monster in *Heart of Darkness* Conrad himself? Or did Achebe misconstrue Conrad's intentions, which were to expose the evils of colonialism?

Student work is evaluated with a common rubric designed by teachers. Educators meet yearly to participate in "moderation studies" to continue to hone the system. Teachers within the consortium have also developed collaborative relationships with educators throughout the country, who have visited and regularly participate in professional development activities at consortium schools.

A TRACK RECORD OF RESULTS

Schools within the consortium represent the same diversity as is found in the city's schools as a whole, and the consortium has registered successes across the board, from high-achieving students to student populations that have struggled to achieve, including English language learners, students receiving special education services and minority males. The consortium's contribution to equity in education has been recognized by leading civil rights groups, including the Children's Defense Fund in Washington, D.C.

Today, the consortium's results in student achievement and college attendance outpace national averages and those from neighboring districts.

- 85 percent of consortium graduates attended colleges rated competitive or better and persisted in college at rates higher than the national average.
 - The consortium's graduation rate for students with special needs is more than twice the rate in New York City schools.
 - The consortium's class of 2008 had a persistence rate (second year) at four-year colleges of 93 percent, compared with a national rate of 74.7 percent and 80.8 percent in New York state.
 - The rate for two-year colleges stands out even more, with consortium students persisting at a rate of 83.9 percent, compared with 53.5 percent nationally and 59.1 percent in New York state.
 - The consortium suspension rate of 5 percent is less than half the suspension rate for New York City high schools and charter high schools and 5-12 schools.
 - The consortium has fostered a collaborative workplace for teachers, leading to significantly lower teacher turnover. Among teachers with fewer than five years of experience, 85 percent remain in their schools, a retention rate more than twice the overall rate for teachers in New York City.
- Tashlik says teachers are thriving in the system, with teachers who are new to the consortium often feeling as if they "died and went to teacher heaven."
- "So much of what is coming out of Washington and state capitals is based on the idea of competition—teachers compete, and the best will rise," Tashlik says. "This [the consortium] is based on the idea of collaboration. We're in this together; we're not in this to knock each other down."
- 86 percent of African-American male and 90 percent of Latino male consortium graduates were accepted to college in 2011 (compared with 37 percent and 42 percent nationally).