



NEW HAMPSHIRE'S PACE ASSESSMENTS: TRANSFORMING ASSESSMENTS AND LEARNING FROM THE GROUND UP

Jenny Deenik, a high school biology and chemistry teacher at Souhegan High School in Amherst, New Hampshire, has a grounding professional philosophy: With the right supports, all students can learn.

For her students with disabilities, this means that rather than “modifying expectations,” Deenik looks to “accommodate needs.” Throughout her career, she has implemented performance-based learning where students can engage with and demonstrate learning through multiple means, rather than just using paper-and-pencil tests. In a heterogeneous classroom that includes students with and without disabilities, performance-based learning lets Deenik breathe relevance and rigor into each student’s learning experience. This philosophy could be implemented by any teacher, but the challenge lies in the fact that for most teachers, the approach is misaligned to the exclusive focus of single, summative, paper-and-pencil, multiple-choice tests. That’s where Deenik considers herself lucky: Her high school is part of the Souhegan Cooperative School District, which is participating in a new effort in New Hampshire to redefine what assessment is and how it is used.

THE VISION: A SYSTEM BUILT ON HIGH EXPECTATIONS AND SUPPORTS

By most measures, New Hampshire, as a state, was doing “pretty good” for Deenik’s students—the state’s high school graduation rates and NAEP math and reading scores placed it among the top performers in the nation. Nevertheless, “pretty good” wasn’t good enough. When state leaders looked at postsecondary remediation rates and skills for emerging growth industries (including health care and other STEM fields), there was a significant gap between the type of education students in Deenik’s classroom needed to succeed and the education they were receiving.

Upon identifying this gap, the question became how to make the necessary changes for students in the “Live Free or Die” state. “We had to come up with a new approach. Top-down approaches don’t really work in New Hampshire,” notes Paul Leather, Deputy Commissioner of Education at the New Hampshire Department of Education (NHDOE). If the state’s effort were going to do right by Deenik and her students, NHDOE would have to take on a supportive, capacity-building role rather than a punitive one.

As efforts moved forward, New Hampshire’s approach came down to this statement: “If we believe our students are to be college and career ready, then the system must advance students based on mastery of knowledge, skills, and dispositions, which requires a comprehensive system of educator and school support.” Achieving this aspiration required several changes: Success for students with disabilities and their peers must be defined in a broader way; Deenik and her colleagues must be supported by their schools in changing their practice; and their school must be supported in changing the structures of learning—including use of time, grading, assessment, and other norms. In sum, the system had to be built on reciprocity: Schools and students are held to higher



expectations, but they are also provided greater supports. This would extend to how teachers would interact with students, how schools and districts would interact with teachers, and how the state would interact with schools and districts.

THE STRATEGY: PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT FOR COMPETENCY EDUCATION (PACE)

In support of the new vision, the state enacted a policy that freed students from the constraints of a traditional Carnegie Unit. In other words, Deenik's students—both with and without disabilities—could demonstrate competencies not by the amount of time they sat in a classroom seat and by passing a single cumulative test, but by satisfying one of multiple avenues to demonstrate their learning, including traditional tests, performances, or other activities.

With this competency-based framework laying the foundation for what education should look like in New Hampshire, the state next needed to determine how best to assess student mastery of the competencies.

The Performance Assessment for Competency Education (PACE) allows students to craft their own responses to a problem by demonstrating deep learning that goes beyond most traditional multiple-choice exams. Deenik and other educators across schools and districts implementing PACE come together and develop both a set of performance tasks designed to reflect that a student has mastered a competency—the key knowledge, skills, and dispositions in a specific discipline (reading, math, and science)—and rubrics that objectively reflect whether a student's achievements on that performance task reflect mastery of the competency. Specifically, PACE provides students with disabilities and their peers multiple ways to demonstrate their learning, offers local districts the flexibility to drive assessments, and places the state in the role of providing a continuum of supports for districts building their capacity to implement the new assessment system.

In addition to bringing the state closer to its vision of education, PACE also provides the potential to transform and improve classroom instruction for Deenik and other teachers involved in the initiative. Susan Lyons, an associate at the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment (Center for Assessment), a key partner to the state in monitoring and supporting PACE implementation, notes, "Because PACE performance tasks are designed to measure the content standards more authentically and deeply than traditional assessments, they require greater degrees of perseverance and student agency. PACE educators know that in order to prepare students to succeed on these kinds of rigorous assessments, their everyday instruction needs to change to design more engaging and meaningful interactions between students and the content."

NEW HAMPSHIRE'S PACE INITIATIVE AT A GLANCE

Location: **New Hampshire**

of Students: **~180,000**

% of Students With Disabilities:
~16,000–18,000

Year PACE Began:
**Efforts began in 2011 and
received approval from
the U.S. Department of
Education in March 2015**

The question that continues to guide the state’s work in New Hampshire is how to make the aspiration Lyons describes a reality for all students, including those with disabilities. Advocates for PACE highlight several benefits of performance assessments for students with disabilities, such as providing multiple modes to demonstrate understanding and providing a measure of learning that is more instructionally informative in guiding interventions.

Early results documenting the effect of these assessments on learning have been positive. For example, a recent study by Carla Evans, a University of New Hampshire researcher, found that districts implementing PACE were more successful than comparison districts at raising the Smarter Balanced scores of students with disabilities in eighth-grade math.

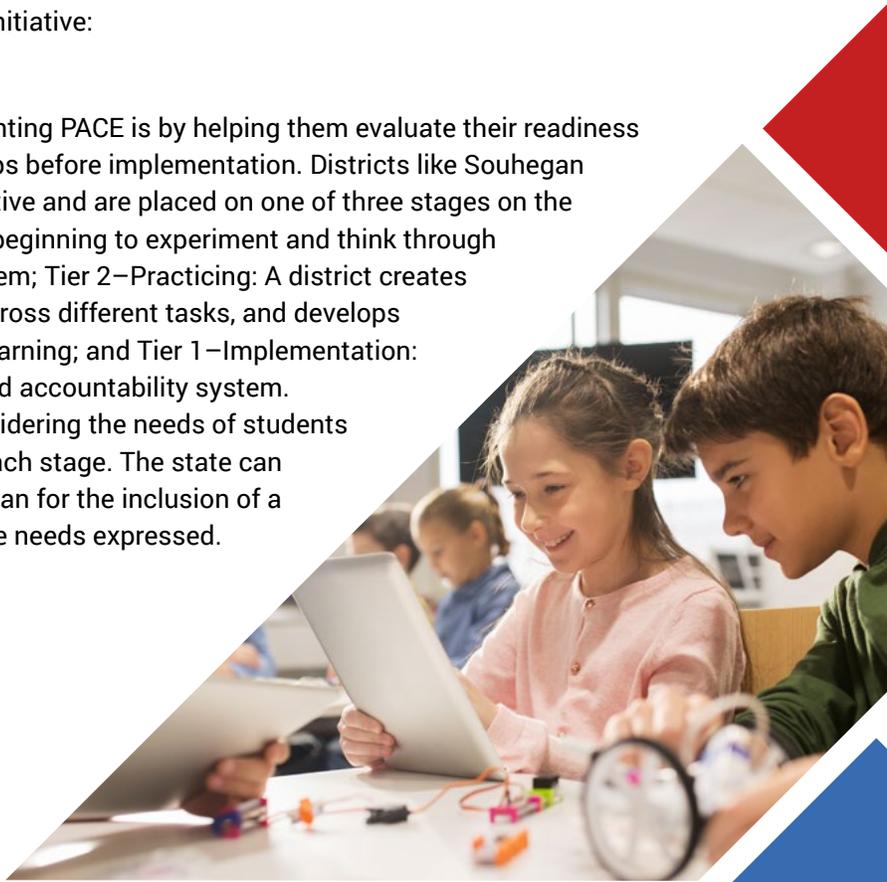
Still, even schools and districts implementing PACE call for cautious optimism: If unaddressed, the specific learning needs that students with disabilities bring to classrooms—such as problems with executive functioning and difficulty managing change—may pose even greater barriers to learning under PACE. There is likely validity within both arguments: There are benefits for students with disabilities, but those benefits can only be realized with dedicated attention and effort.

IMPLEMENTING THE PACE ASSESSMENTS IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

Leaders in New Hampshire recognize the importance of ensuring that PACE is beneficial to and yields valid results for all students. For that reason, ensuring equity for students with disabilities has been a focal point in all four key areas of implementation of the PACE initiative:

1. **Readiness Assessment**

One way the state supports districts implementing PACE is by helping them evaluate their readiness to implement PACE and identify their next steps before implementation. Districts like Souhegan apply to the state to be part of the PACE initiative and are placed on one of three stages on the continuum: Tier 3–Planning: A district is just beginning to experiment and think through steps to implement a competency-based system; Tier 2–Practicing: A district creates a performance task bank, calibrates scores across different tasks, and develops educators’ capacity to use results to inform learning; and Tier 1–Implementation: A district fully implements the assessment and accountability system. Opportunities to ensure that districts are considering the needs of students with disabilities in Deenik’s classroom lie at each stage. The state can direct experts and supports to help districts plan for the inclusion of a variety of student subgroups depending on the needs expressed.



2. **State and Local Performance Assessments**

Because developing competencies and associated assessments can be a time- and staff-intensive process for educators like Deenik who are already overstretched, New Hampshire has developed model competencies, common state performance tasks, and a task bank that a participating district could draw from to inform their own system. Districts like Souhegan are free to adopt their own competencies and assessments, but by participating in PACE, they agree to enter a process by which they submit performance tasks and competencies for peer review. The peer review process includes evaluating the quality of test items against a state-level rubric and ensures comparability in both tasks and scoring. This process can help prevent unintentional bias against particular groups of students and can ensure that tasks abide by principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) so that they are accessible for all students.

3. **Ongoing Professional Learning and Capacity Building**

Performance assessments can have a substantially positive impact on how teachers think about instruction and how the system evaluates success. This will have significant implications for nontraditional students with disabilities in Deenik's classroom, whose challenges range from mild learning disabilities to autism. To ensure districts make the most of performance assessments, the state provides intensive supports to participating districts, requiring them to participate in pilot task validation and scoring, work with coaches on implementing the performance assessment system, and participate in a peer review audit of their work within two years of starting the initiative. These different channels provide the state ample opportunity to help districts develop a system that supports all students, including those with disabilities.

4. **Use Smarter Balanced as a Check on Quality**

In return for abiding by these different assurances of quality, the state provides districts flexibility in administering the statewide Smarter Balanced Assessments (SBAC) once in elementary school and once in middle school rather than once a year in grades 3–8, while administering their common and local performance assessments in other grades and the SAT in high school. Continuing to administer and disaggregate outcomes for SBAC can provide a useful gauge of the district's local performance assessments and, specifically, how accurately they reflect the academic progress of a variety of different students and their learning needs. In addition, districts are provided data on the proficiency of students with disabilities each year, whether the state test is administered or not, in order to provide district and school leaders with a clear picture of what is required to improve performance for all students.



BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

In the end, the state and participating districts are striving for these assessments to serve not only as learning measurement tools, but also to help meet the state’s vision of improving the quality of instruction and educational experience for all students. Achieving this goal requires that practitioners and policymakers keep in mind the benefits and challenges the system poses to students with disabilities and other struggling learners.

Key Benefits of PACE Assessments for Students with Disabilities

- **Increased Engagement**

PACE assessments have the potential to offer students a more relatable and engaging learning experience, which is particularly important to students with learning disabilities who may struggle with processing and retrieving information.



- **Greater Flexibility**

Requiring students to do something in a fixed way can be particularly challenging for students with disabilities, who benefit from demonstrating their learning in different ways.

- **Data-Informed Instruction**

Compared to traditional multiple-choice assessments, performance assessments provide a clearer picture of how a student’s unique learning challenge may impact learning and how to personalize instruction and interventions to address that challenge.

Key Challenges to Address for States Implementing Initiatives Like PACE for Students With Disabilities

- **Rigor**

Does the state or district implementing performance assessments have standards for task rigor that are common across different groups of students? Has the state or district adequately planned to provide full access for students with disabilities through the principles of UDL?

- **Comparability**

Does the state or district implementing a performance assessment system have a peer review process to ensure comparability across different task items?

- **Assessment Design and Educator Skill**

Are assessment tasks designed to eliminate bias against learning differences? Are educators like Deenik trained in interpreting assessments in a way that informs the instruction of students with different learning needs?



CONCLUSION

Whether the starting point is a state, a district, or a school, large-scale changes like those described above are difficult. Leaders change, resources shift, and people revert to practices that may not be effective. While there is much more work to do, the scale of New Hampshire’s efforts is impressive, especially in light of the state’s strong culture of local control. New Hampshire’s success highlights how leaders can gradually work to develop a system built for the future. To ensure that all students—including students with disabilities—reap the benefits of these changes, states, districts, and schools must remain vigilant and develop processes to address these students’ needs at every stage. This is the only way that equity for all students can become a reality.