School Leaders Look at Student Work

Through a collaborative assessment process, school leaders work to identify what standards truly mean for teaching and learning.

Beth L. Graham and Kevin Fahey

We used to dread Sunday afternoons. We sat in front of the television, surrounded by piles of quizzes, essays, and student projects. College basketball games, golf tournaments, and old movies consoled us as we worked our way through the stacks, hoping that we would complete them by dinner. We worked in isolation, devoted very little time to each piece of work, and quickly assigned a grade to every one.

During the past year, we have been involved in a project that turns this experience familiar to teachers and former teachers on its head. Along with 15 other school leaders in the Danvers, Massachusetts, public schools, we devote one afternoon a month to looking at, describing, and wondering about student work. We work together and spend a lot of time on one piece of work, but we never grade it. This process is called collaborative assessment.

In Massachusetts, as in many other states, education reform is going down the now-familiar path of externally driven standards, state-mandated frameworks, and high-stakes testing. Educators face intense pressure to achieve “high standards” (and higher test scores) with their students. Yet, arguably, although the goal of state frameworks and testing is to raise the bar for student achievement, merely calling for higher test scores ensures neither that these standards will be achieved nor that students are using their minds well.

Few teachers and administrators know how to make the standards published by the Massachusetts Department of Education meaningful to their own classroom experiences. Does our students’ work meet the standards? What do the standards really mean? What can we do to ensure that all of our students’ work will be at the level indicated by our state standards? The simple truth is that we don’t really know. The externally produced, multiple-subject state standards are overwhelming and not very meaningful to most teachers. Unless teachers and administrators can come to some fundamental understanding of how their students’ work relates to a standard, they will be unable to create the conditions that will raise the work to the level of state standards.

What Does Student Work Tell Us?
How can administrators invite teachers to look deeply at student work when they themselves do not know what to look for? For all the effort surrounding education reform and state standards, teachers and administrators seldom collectively answer the essential question of whether their students’ work provides evidence that students know and can do what we say they should know and be able to do. How do we know whether our students’ work is good enough to meet the standard?

These are the questions that the members of the administrative team (central office administrators, building principals and assistant principals, and K-12 curriculum directors) in the Danvers Public Schools have been working together to resolve. Since November 1997, the administrative team has devoted two hours a month to looking collaboratively at student work in an effort to construct a common language,
a shared meaning, and a collective vision around teaching, learning, and assessment. Our process has been driven by the question: What does this work tell us about standards in our schools?

Guided by the Collaborative Assessment Conference protocol, designed by Steve Seidel of Harvard University’s Project Zero, we have looked at student compositions, artwork, and science projects. We have listened to student readers, analyzed students’ attempts to solve math problems, and examined products from interdisciplinary units. Our conversations, which are focused, intentional, and grounded in pieces of real student work, have evolved into discussions about assessment, the nature of intelligence, differentiated instruction, the role of leadership in student achievement, and a host of other topics.

**The Collaborative Assessment Conference**

Through the Collaborative Assessment Conference (fig. 1), school leaders in Danvers employ a simple structure to hold a critical, yet supportive, conversation and develop a common understanding of standards. A piece of student work is presented without identifying the student or the grade level, the nature of the assignment, or how the piece was assessed—in other words, without context. Once the group has reviewed it, a volunteer facilitator invites participants to describe, without judgment, what we see. When one of us inadvertently offers a judgment (and we always do), our facilitator asks for evidence to support the claim. We see many different things, and, through the eyes of many, we begin to see things differently. The facilitator then moves to the question phase, in which participants inquire about the context of the piece. We often begin our comments with the phrase “I’m wondering . . .” In the third step of the protocol, we speculate about what the child may be working on—what problem is the student trying to solve?

During these three steps, school leaders work toward understanding how the child comes to understand. We abandon trying to make the student’s understanding match our own. The task of looking at student work without first knowing the context provides a daunting challenge. For example, during a recent session that focused on a piece of student writing, we were appalled and humbled to discover that we could not identify with certainty the grade level or age of the student. Some of us thought the work was from 3rd grade; others, 5th grade; and a few, 6th grade. We find ourselves equally divided over issues of quality in student work, what kind of standards a piece represents, and how the work could be improved.

For some of us, the next phase in the protocol brings relief; for others, it adds to the messiness. In the fourth step, the context of the work is revealed to us. An individual familiar with the piece describes the assignment, the grade, and the student. Although the questions and musings made public in the second step of the protocol become clarified at this point, we are often surprised to learn the truth.

Then comes the richest, most powerful part of our conversation:

**FIGURE 1**

**Steps in the Collaborative Assessment Conference**

Participants read or observe the work in silence, then:

1. Describe the work. Suspend judgment.
2. Ask questions about the work, the child, and the assignment.
3. Speculate about what the student is working on.
4. Listen to the presenting teacher, who reveals the context of the work.
5. Discuss implications for teaching and learning.
6. Reflect on the conference.

—Adapted from Seidel et al., 1997

What are the implications for teaching and learning? What are the implications for our work as school leaders? At this phase in the protocol, assumptions surface around such notions as the nature of reading, ability, and heterogeneous grouping. How do we get all of our students to write at the level implicit in the state standards? What should 5th grade students know and be able to do in history, math, or the arts?

Once we have completed the Collaborative Assessment Conference, our conversation moves to an essential question that emerged from the session. Some of the questions we have asked ourselves include What do grades signify? When do we evaluate, and when do we assess? How do we measure understanding? and the most fundamental question, Can all students learn well?

**This Is Real Work**

Obstacles to this kind of work in schools and among school leaders abound. Our administrative team wrestles with the problem of creating conditions to promote deep understanding of the relationship between student work and statewide standards. Yet the daily pace of school life conspires against us. First, school leaders have little time for sustained, in-depth conversation. Neither teachers nor administrators have time for reflecting on their practice. It’s ironic that educators are charged with creating conditions that promote deep understanding and powerful learning for others, yet enjoy none of the conditions that would promote their own understanding of teaching and learning. Our administrative team, therefore, carves out time after school, and we regard that time as sacred.

Second, we have found that it is much easier to complain about state regulations, to endure the budget process, and to obsess over bus schedules than to have conversations about teaching and learning. These managerial issues will not go away; we accept them as part of our existence in schools. But
by participating in structured conversations about the real work of schools—teaching and learning—we encourage fundamental discourse as we keep the technical aspects of school leadership in perspective.

The collaborative assessment protocol itself goes against the culture of schools. It is a slow process during which participants are invited to suspend judgment, to listen, to question, to wonder—things that we don't do well in schools. We have found it necessary to follow a step-by-step process that keeps us from returning to our familiar patterns of behavior. We need to practice this way of talking with one another.

Finally, the members of the administrative team have come to discover that we do not share a common language or vision about standards or student work. Often don't agree on where we should be going? There are no easy answers.

**Holding a Districtwide Conversation**

Despite the difficult issues generated by this kind of reflective practice, the administrative team is devoting even more time and energy to this work. Why? If school leaders dedicate considerable time to such conversations, the conversations must be important. This is a powerful message for teachers and for the entire school community.

Instead of being another practice that administrators promote but haven't themselves learned, collaborative assessment has become an important exercise that school leaders in Danvers regularly use and can model for the school community.

The Collaborative Assessment Conference has revealed to us that we hold different, often contradictory, assumptions about teaching and learning.

For example, a warrior shield created by a student who was working on an interdisciplinary unit in social studies and art provoked a passionate conversation about implications for instruction and learning. Some members felt that the patterns and detail of the shield were an indication that the work was created by a very bright child. Others disclosed that they felt that the student artist was nothing more than a good mimic—a child who was skilled at copying—therefore the work showed no originality or critical thinking. And some of us felt that the artwork told us something about talent, but nothing about intelligence.

The Collaborative Assessment Conference has revealed to us that we hold different, often contradictory, assumptions about teaching and learning. As school leaders charged with raising student achievement across the district, what do we do when faced with the knowledge that we do not share a systemwide vision? How can we help move our school forward when we further, collaborative assessment affords school leaders the opportunity to experience and use a protocol that is dependent on skilled facilitation. If the principal lacks experience with the protocol, it is unlikely that he or she could either convince teachers that it is an important practice, or provide the facilitation to ensure its success.

Perhaps most important, engagement in regular, structured conversations about student work debunks the myth that being a school leader means having to be the ultimate expert when it comes to learning issues. In Danvers, school leaders continue to learn—and model learning—about the fundamental work of schools.

We don't really know whether test scores will improve as a result of our work with the Collaborative Assessment Conference. But we do know that our school district now dedicates much more time to real conversations about teaching, learning, and encouraging all students to produce quality work. This year, the Collaborative Assessment Conference protocol is being practiced with teachers at whole-school faculty meetings, department gatherings, and first-year-teacher seminars. Teachers are engaged in constructing a common understanding around assessment, standards, and learning: an understanding that is shared, not contrived, and that emerges from the meaning they and their students continue to make.

As an administrative team, we acknowledge that regardless of our individual roles, each of us is responsible for every student and, therefore, for every piece of student work. We must unearth the connections among our respective roles on the school leadership team and the work produced by all students. We concede our differences as we work toward narrowing the range of our assumptions and opinions by looking for evidence of them in real student work.

For right now, we are able to hold many contradictions around fundamental issues of teaching and learning, but we hope that from our work, a shared interpretation of external standards will emerge. We are no longer haunted by the suspicion that we really don't know what or how our students are learning or what constitutes high standards. We have begun to create what we perceive to be some of the conditions that promote student achievement and that make schools better places for all students. Together we've been able to name our dilemmas and surface our assumptions, and together we shall continue along the journey of deep understanding.

---


Beth I. Graham (e-mail: graham@massed.net) is Director of Unified Arts, K–12, and Kevin Fahey is Director of Sociocultural Studies, K–12, with the Danvers Public Schools, Curriculum Center, 64 Cabot Rd., Danvers, MA 01923.