Thomas Hatch and Steve Seidel

Putting Student Work on the Table


We all share a number of enduring images of American education — the little red schoolhouse, a teacher standing at the head of the classroom, rows of students seated at desks, and children bursting out of the school doors at the end of the year. Another classic image of American education actually takes place far from the school itself: in living rooms and kitchens at the end of each term. In this scene, a child hands his or her report card to a parent. It is a moment filled with a range of emotions — pride, anxiety, confusion, anger, embarrassment — and, remarkably, very little information. Often all that is communicated is an “A” or a “C.” Parent and child are often left to wonder — or imagine — just what this mark means and why it was given in this case. For many, a “B” or a “72” is a profoundly unsatisfying assessment of one’s effort and learning in school.

A newer image of American public education is the list of standardized test scores from each school in a district that is published in the local paper. While considerable importance is attached to these numbers, there is little clarity or agreement about just what they signify. Some perceive them as indicators of the quality of schooling available. Others point out that such scores reflect the influence of factors like the range and numbers of students taking the tests and the level of income of the community and not just the quality of schooling itself. Whatever the theories or deeper meanings, these test scores are more likely to lead to “sound and fury” (much of it over the consequences for real estate prices) than to significant and sustained improvements in educational practice.

Over the past decade, an even newer image may be emerging: it is the image of a committee, slightly disheveled from hours of meeting together, seated around a conference table. On the walls are numerous sheets of chart paper, detailing the committee’s answers to the question, “What should our high school graduates know and be able to do?” These meetings are part of numerous current efforts by professional organizations, states, local districts, and national organizations to develop new educational standards. These standards are envisioned as part of a new assessment system that will enable everyone to tell how students are progressing towards the goals that they need to meet to graduate from high school.
However, discussions of standards are no more likely to provide support for student learning than report card grades or test scores published in the paper without some way to help students apply those standards to their own work. Changes in student performance remain as elusive as the connections between naming a goal and knowing how to achieve it. Naming is not sufficient. Knowing the standards that have to be reached does not provide the kind of information or the insights that teachers and students need to determine what has to happen for performance to improve.

Grades, report cards, and standardized tests do not necessarily have to be eliminated for schools to improve. But these measures do not provide a close careful look at what students are doing, nor do they provide many insights for those seeking to help students to meet the standards that we set. We cannot demand high standards and accept minimal information. To improve student learning in schools, students, teachers, parents, and administrators must be willing to put actual pieces of student work on the table and have serious conversations about making high standards a reality.

THREE NEW IMAGES FOR SCHOOLING AND ASSESSMENT

Around the country, a number of schools are bringing together various members of the school community in conversations about student work. These conversations provide many opportunities to develop new images and new possibilities for schooling:

- Instead of solemnly opening up a child’s report card, parents are now opening up invitations to come into the classroom and to examine portfolios of their child’s work.

- Instead of sitting isolated in their classrooms, grading students’ work, teachers are sitting together to share the work their students have done and to reflect on how to help their students improve it.

- Instead of filing into school board meetings to debate the ups and downs of the latest test scores, community members are walking into exhibitions of student work to talk about how to assess, support, and celebrate the progress of their schools.

The conference begins with just the child and parent at the table, talking together. The child leads the parent through the portfolio, showing the work, describing what she did and why she did it, and providing her own assessment of the work. The parent has seen or heard about some of these assignments before; invariably, though, there are some major surprises about the quantity, variety, and accomplishment of the work spread out on the table. A range of

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These conversations — among parents, teachers, and students, among teachers, and between school and community members — help to provide the information, understanding, and motivation needed to support the learning of every child.

Conversations among Students, Teachers, and Parents

In many schools, the parent conference is the only time teachers and parents come together to talk seriously about the child with whom they both spend many hours a day. Traditionally, a parent (or two) comes into the classroom at a brief conversation with the teacher to hear how his or her child is doing. The focus is often on what is marked down in the grade book or on the behavior of the child in class. But imagine a very different possibility.

Parents receive an invitation to the classroom, from the teacher and the child! When they arrive, not only is a collection of the student’s work “on the table,” but the child is present as well to provide explanations of the work and to join in the conversation. Together, parent and child might examine a science project, some recent drawings, a new short story, maps, charts, graphs, and a journal.

These activities are not new for the child, but neither are they new for the parent. The parent can see a child’s work represented in a variety of ways, representing a breadth of subject matter. Quality is often evident, and, sometimes, it is vividly clear to both child and parent that this collection does not represent a satisfying body of work. In time, the teacher joins the conversation to offer another perspective, answer and ask questions, and to help in considering appropriate goals for the child’s next term.

What does this careful examination of the child’s work reveal? Looking through a selection of a year’s work, we can see progress, or the absence of progress, in a host of areas — such as skill in writing or understanding of scientific, mathematical, or historical concepts. By looking across several years, parents can see themes, issues, interests, and concerns emerge and develop in a child’s work, much as they do in a collection or exhibition of the work of an adult artist. A review of the work collected by young adults at the end of their senior year reveals what they can do and what their value, what they are interested in and have learned how to pursue. More than a résumé, or a catalogue of accomplishments or awards, we see in a tangible form that the child has a history which demonstrates what he has done and where
she is headed. Instead of focusing attention on the merits of a particular grade, these occasions enable students, teachers, and parents to examine the evidence that reveals whether or not a child is making progress and to determine what can be done to support further learning.

**Conversations among Teachers**

Though there are regular faculty meetings for business issues and committee meetings after school, few schools schedule time for discussions of student work. But imagine a school in which every member of the professional staff participated in monthly meetings to examine and discuss student work. In such schools, teachers take an hour out of their day for a scheduled session with six to twelve colleagues. They come together around a large table in the library. One teacher has brought a fictional, first-person account of an Irish immigrant’s experience in America written by a sixth-grader, complete with illustrations. All of the teachers read the story. Then they begin to describe it, pointing to any aspects of it that they find striking. These descriptions lead to questions; questions lead to speculations on the many things the young author is trying to understand or achieve in the work. The teacher who brought the work has been listening, taking notes, and eventually joins in the conversation.

The purpose of these kinds of conversations is to examine work produced by students far longer and more carefully than is typically possible in schools — and to do it collectively to share ideas and to benefit from multiple perspectives. Typically, these conversations lead in three directions, often simultaneously.

First, the conversations explore the work itself and often contribute to insights about the child, her interests, skills, and what she is working on. Second, they raise questions about the goals and structure of the assignment, the support and resources available, and the kind of assessment carried out. Finally, these conversations often lead to discussion of key issues and concepts in the particular domain in which the child was working (for example, writing poetry, mapmaking, or conducting and reporting on scientific experiments).

The results? We have found that the teachers who present work typically find that some of their own impressions about the students’ work are confirmed, but they are also likely to gain new insights into the thinking of their students and the strengths and weaknesses of their assignments.

The other teachers often develop a sense of the kind and quality of the work going on inside their building. They learn about students they will teach in future years and see how students they taught in previous years have developed. We also have found that teachers gain new ideas for their own classrooms and begin to develop a shared understanding of standards in different domains and the steps students go through to meet them.

**Conversations between the School and the Community**

Beyond events such as a football game or the spring musical, most people in a school’s community have few opportunities to see student work or students at work. Instead, their views of youth are often based on what they see in the streets and shopping malls, in the paper and on TV. But imagine a school run like an artist’s studio: a place where students are always perfecting their craft and ready to display and discuss their work, a place where the halls are transformed into galleries, and where open exhibitions take place regularly.

In such schools, parents, school-department employees, neighbors, business people, and others in the community receive frequent invitations to come to the school and meet with teachers and children to see the work students have created. These events — the fourth-grade project fair, a sixth-grade gallery reception, the second-grade book-signing party, portfolio breakfasts — can feature work from one class, a whole grade, or the whole school. Like art openings, there is often an air of celebration (and usually good food as well). Such events take preparation. Work must be selected, displays mounted, explanations written or rehearsed, and invitations designed and sent out. Students are central to thinking through and accomplishing these tasks.

While many of these events celebrate students’ achievements, others are far more formal and provide opportunities to evaluate students’ work. For example, in many “exhibitions,” panels of experts from relevant fields of work as well as members of the community are gathered to review student work. Students — often with a variety of visual aids — present the work by summarizing a paper, reporting the results of an experiment, analyzing a key issue in the community, or performing some other demonstration. They often reflect on the quality of their performances and answer questions. Together, the panel and the students consider issues arising from the work — issues addressed and issues that might need to be addressed.

In some places, community members are invited to review a school portfolio and discuss the overall progress of the school. These school portfolios move well beyond the traditional measures of performance — test scores, student attendance, and failure data. They usually feature student work but also include documentation of professional-development activities, of school/community projects, of services provided to children beyond the traditional academic program, and of efforts
to create a safe and caring environment for children.

Whether the focus is on celebration or evaluation, reviewing work from across the school through exhibitions, school portfolios, or other means provides both the school and the community with deeper insight into what goes on inside schools, and how those activities serve student learning. When the sharing of student work goes beyond typical bulletin board displays, people can begin to learn about the school itself: the variety, consistency, and level of challenge of the assignments, the depth with which students have been encouraged to pursue their subjects, and the resources to which they have (and have not) had access. In the process, the school staff and the members of the community who participate become partners in an ever-evolving process of improving education.

**CONCLUSION**

A sad irony in American schools is that, while we are supposed to prepare young people to be capable of using knowledge to design and conduct projects and fashion products of value to self and the community, we make little effort to show and share, assess, and evaluate the things children make in school. In general, our schools treat the work children do as disposable — collect it, grade it, hand it back, and never revisit it.

But from the episodes at home when report cards are opened to the school board meetings where test scores are announced, we have opportunities to change the way we treat students' work. By putting student work on the table, we can begin treating it as a valuable expression of our children's thoughts and feelings and as a window into their learning, effort, and degrees of accomplishment. By putting student work on the table, students, parents, and teachers can engage in serious conversations about standards for excellence and the means for achieving them. By putting student work on the table in exhibitions, professional development workshops, and school board meetings, we can marshal all the energy and all the resources at our disposal for the learning activities that matter most.

Looking hard and seriously at student work is not a magic key to school reform. What is taught, how it is taught, and what is learned will not change overnight. But without these conversations, we will continue to base our decisions about student learning and school improvement on limited evidence and minimal information. Without looking carefully at the actual work that students do for school, we will continue to ignore this essential source of information on how our children are developing, how our schools are progressing, and what all of us can do to help.

Thomas Hatch is a Research Associate at Harvard Project Zero. Currently, he is the Director of the ATLAS Seminar, which brings together members of organizations involved in school-improvement initiatives, including the Coalition of Essential Schools, the School Development Program, and the Education Development Center, to investigate some of the key challenges in educational reform. He has written articles on the development and education of intelligences in young children, project-based learning, and the challenges of school improvement, and educational reform.

Steve Seidel is a Research Associate at Harvard Project Zero. He directs the Project Zero/Massachusetts Schools Network, a collaboration with the Massachusetts Department of Education and eleven elementary and middle schools that explores school-wide implementation of portfolio assessment and project-based curriculum. He also directs the New England Regional Assessment Network and the Shakespeare & Company Research Study.

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