

AUTHOR INFO



From: Cortlandt Manor, NY

5 Emojis that describe me:



"In middle school, I was fortunate enough to have a classical theater class - playing Nicholas Bottom and Rosalind (and practicing my accent with assorted trees and mirrors) gave me a ridiculous amount of happiness!"

"I want to understand the words that run the world - to be able to dig through a hundred page pdf in legalese and emerge with the loophole we need to better the system."



USING CONTENT-BASED FINAL EXAMS TO PROVE MASTERY: I'd like to examine the validity/efficiency of traditional, two-hour, fact-based multiple choice-driven finals as a metric of student ability in a given course.



The fundamental purpose of secondary education is not to instill specific concepts, but abilities, with the aim of preparing students for the workforce. Even the most enthusiastic of teachers don't have high expectations that an alum will be able to whip out Riemann sums on command; rather, they hope that the ability of problem solving (or perhaps even more specifically, the notion that what is complex may be broken into simple, recognizable ideas) persists. With this in mind, traditional content-based final exams largely fail to achieve their stated purpose of proving mastery. While they may ensure that students have internalized course matter, they do not guarantee sufficiency in the crucial abilities a course is supposed to teach. In addition, a variety of confounding factors - test anxiety, physical setting, learning disabilities, reading/writing ability where literacy is not the skill being measured - further invalidate results.



A culminating effort that requires students to apply concepts in an original manner would be a better means of truly measuring the extent to which a learner is equipped to operate outside of the classroom (i.e. in the workforce). The broadness of this metric is limitless - a verbal report followed by questioning, thesis style; an experiment; and writing word problems with realistic scenarios that use a specific math technique are all viable alternatives to the traditional final. Incorporating an element of choice that enables students to select whatever option they feel will best showcase their proficiency additionally makes the nontraditional "final" a more accessible and accurate assessment. For example, high anxiety individuals (me!) may opt for a video project filmed outside of the classroom in a low-stress environment that enables optimal performance.

This is not to say that grades are an easily removable component of public education - quarterly averages may continue to serve as a source of incentive/proof that necessary material is understood. However, one massive content-based final that is commonly weighted at 20% of the entire course grade simply makes no sense - even students that memorize all of the factual information may have an off-day, rendering the final inefficient in terms of measuring content knowledge in addition to competency (ability).



KEY RESOURCES

[Two major school districts eliminating some final exams - The Washington Post](#)

[What Schools Could Use Instead Of Standardized Tests : NPR Ed : NPR](#)

[FAQ - Montgomery County Public Schools](#)

[Assessment Options - Montgomery County Public Schools Rockville, MD](#)

[Project Based Learning \(PBL\) / PBL](#)

[What is Project Based Learning? | PBLWorks](#)

[PBL with a Purpose -- THE Journal](#)

CONSIDERING DIFFERENT APPROACHES

Loudoun, Virginia replaced midterms and final exam requirements with metric options that include “project-based learning...hands-on experiments and simulations”; project-based learning is now integral in their district from K-12. They work closely with Buck Institute for Education and have modified their “gold standard model” to a simpler, 4-standard approach, which includes the notions that “projects must cover significant content and important competencies; involve authentic, challenging problems; result in a public product; and be connected to the world”.

WHAT APPEARS TO WORK WELL: Meaningful learning opportunities that offer experience outside the classroom abound. [For example] middle schoolers presented proposals for local historical markers after significant research; they involved “primary sources, making comparisons between local and national history, and...the specific text for their proposed marker”. A team of local experts selected the top project - a commemoration of the old Ashburn Colored School, which served Black students before desegregation - and it was eventually implemented after approval by the Virginia Dept. of Historic Resources. In terms of workforce preparation, the invaluable experience.

Montgomery County, Maryland followed suit, voting to end two-hour finals at the middle school level which they previously weighted at 25% of the course grade. They were replaced with less heavily weighted quarterly standardized tests.

- *Arguments presented to the Board of Education included the fact that among those who perform poorly every June, English language learners, disabled students and students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds are disproportionately represented*
- *A survey of 28 secondary education principals found that more than half supported eliminating midterms and finals entirely, and 11 believed that they should be given in an alternative format - if highly qualified educators no longer support standardized finals, there's an obvious need to reevaluate this paradigm.*
- *Quarterly district exams enable more opportunities for teacher feedback - if students perform poorly in Q2, for example, educators are able to directly address that gap. In contrast, if students receive one failing grade at the end of the year, the suggested gap in education cannot be remedied with additional instruction because the pupil has already moved on.*
- *The new quarterly metric was also used to increase communication between home and school.*

WHAT APPEARS TO WORK WELL: School readiness scores did increase for every ethnic subgroup from 2015-2019 (testing policy change was implemented during the 2016-2017 school year).

WHAT DIDN'T WORK SO WELL:

- Education gaps between Black and Latinx students and White and Asian students persist (so hopes that the new policy would fight such divides do not seem to be sustained)
- Math proficiency, something that had been of concern in Montgomery for several years, did not sustainably increase from 2015-2019 - indeed, it actually decreased for certain subgroups (so hopes that the quarterly metric might increase performance by offering more regular feedback and leaving room for teachers to remedy any content gap also appears to be unsustainable)



INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

GATHERING IDEAS FROM OTHER YOUNG PEOPLE...

Do you feel that final exams accurately represent your course knowledge?

Yes and no...I just don't like the idea of testing in general. I think, at the end of the day, there needs to be some way to test, but also, some people are just bad test takers. Like I know that I wasn't doing great in a course and then I just did really good on the final, but then also, I would do good in a course and then not so great on the final, you know? So I think it just depends per

**Annika,
12th Grade Student**

No, I don't, because some people don't have a good memory and...they might not remember what they learned all the way back in Sept. at the end of the year. So [how well you perform] really has to do with how strong your memory is, not if you actually learned the material during when it was taught.

**J, 8th Grade Student
With Learning Disabilities**

If you could design an alternative end of year metric, what would it look like?

It would just look at your grades for each section of what you learned - how well you did on it...like for each quarter.

Another metric to replace a test:
Probably a video...because it's more exciting and you might not have to remember all the - it's not as stressful as a test.

**J, 8th Grade Student
With Learning Disabilities**

What feelings do you associate with taking final exams?

Stress. I remember my freshman year coming into finals and it looked like a corrections facility. It was very dark and we were literally sitting in the cafeteria [to wait] and then led like ants or sheep to the gym and then sat in rows by name and I [was thinking] 'this is awful'. It's just too...rigid, I think.

Annika, 12th Grade Student

