Developing Assessments of Deeper Learning: The Costs & Benefits of Tests that Help Students Learn
HIGH-QUALITY ASSESSMENTS ARE NEEDED TO EVALUATE THE SKILLS REQUIRED BY TODAY’S SOCIETY
The Changing Demand for Job Skills

“Deeper learning”

Source: Murnane & Levy (1996)
Higher Order Skills Are Needed
But U.S. Tests Focus on Lower-Level Skills

• Since NCLB, tests have become mostly multiple-choice. States phased out performance assessments.
• New RAND study of 17 states’ tests: Only 2% of math items and 21% of ELA items assess higher-order skills.
Other Nations are Transforming Curriculum and Assessments

Finland, Singapore, New Zealand, Hong Kong, the UK, Australia, and others assess deeper learning through:

-- Tests that use open-ended essays and problems to be solved and explained
-- Performance tasks that require students to design and conduct investigations, collect data, analyze and present findings in writing, orally, and with technology
Research finds that these assessments:

• Can be scored reliably by teachers with moderation and auditing systems
• Enable teachers to learn about the standards, curriculum, and teaching
• Support more rigorous instruction and more intensive learning
Change Is on the Horizon

• Common Core State Standards: More attention to deeper learning
• SBAC and PARCC: States coming together to develop next generation assessments
• Some states are re-introducing performance assessments
New Assessments Tap Deeper Learning

SBAC Sixth-Grade Task: Planning a Field Trip

Classroom Activity: The teacher introduces the topic and activates students’ prior knowledge of planning field trips by:

1) Leading students in a whole-class discussion about where they have previously been on field trips or other outings with their school, youth group, or family.

2) Creating a chart showing the class’s preferences by having students first list and then vote on the places they would most like to go on a field trip, followed by whole-class discussion about the top choices.

Student Task: Individual students:

1) Recommend where the class should go on a field trip based on their analysis of the class vote.

2) Determine the per-student cost of going on a field trip to three different locations, based on a chart showing the distance and entrance fees for each option, plus a formula for bus charges.

3) Use information from the cost chart to evaluate a hypothetical recommendation about going to the zoo.

4) Write a note to their teacher recommending and justifying which field trip the class should take based on an analysis of all available information.
CAN HIGH-QUALITY ASSESSMENTS BECOME FEASIBLE AND AFFORDABLE?
Evaluating Costs and Benefits

• Because of NCLB requirements for “every child, every year” testing, states have looked for inexpensive tests
• On average states spend $25 per pupil for NCLB-required ELA and math tests [< ½ of 1% of education spending]
• However, the range is from about $10 to over $100 per pupil
There Are also hidden costs

• Other state and local costs add to the total:
  o Interim & benchmark tests
  o Data systems
  o Test preparation materials
  o Scoring, analysis, and teacher development costs

• With state test costs, these total > $50 per pupil on average

• But because they are focused on the same low-level tests, these costs don’t support deeper learning
And there Are costs to instruction

“I have seen more students who can pass the [state test] but cannot apply those skills to anything if it’s not in the test format. I have students who can do the test but can’t look up words in a dictionary and understand the different meanings.... As for higher quality teaching, I’m not sure I would call it that. Because of the pressure for passing scores, more and more time is spent practicing the test and putting everything in [the test] format.”

-- A Texas Teacher
What are the Benefits of Alternatives?

• Open-ended assessments -- essay examinations and performance tasks -- are more expensive to score, but they can support more diagnostic teaching and more ambitious learning,

• Involving teachers reaps additional benefits for implementing new standards and improving classroom practice
We Could Gain the Benefits of Higher-Quality Assessments and Spend Less Than We Are Spending Today ...
...If We Focus on How to Create a Higher-Quality System

Cost-saving approaches include:

• Multi-state consortia,
• Online delivery of assessments,
• Computer scoring of some open-ended items,
• Engagement of teachers in scoring and analyzing performance tasks,
• An integrated approach to creating a system of curriculum, assessment, instruction, and teacher development.
It is Time to Change the Question:

“Can we Afford High-Quality Assessments?”
IT IS TIME TO CHANGE THE QUESTION:

“Can we afford not to have high-quality assessments?”