

Home > Resources > Classroom Practice > Assessment

Exhibitions: Facing Outward, Pointing Inward

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Exhibitions: Facing Outward, Pointing Inward

by Joseph P. McDonald, originally published in 1992 by the Coalition of Essential Schools

The CES Exhibitions Project of the early 1990s produced a range of work that continues to inform the practice of using exhibitions as a “360 degree” method of transforming teaching and learning, community connections, school design, and assessment. Among that work was this paper coupling the origins of exhibitions with an analysis of how they create outward accountability, providing evidence of what students know and are able to do, and inward accountability, holding schools responsible for planning backwards to create the systems that scaffold and support students as they prepare for graduation by exhibition. This excerpt from “Exhibitions: Facing Outward, Pointing Inward” focuses on the motivation for integrating exhibitions into all aspects of Essential school practice. Its take on how the strategy of public demonstration of mastery via exhibitions is more meaningful, authentic and persuasive than data yielded by the “quick instruments” encouraged by policymakers remains startlingly relevant.

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For the full text of this article, along with complete references and footnotes, please visit the CES National website: http://www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/227

It is an old American habit to imagine utopia in the abstract, then search for the instrument—the policy, the remedy, the technology—that might yield it up quickly. But it is just as old an American habit to start more concretely—with images of a Black man voting, of an Appalachian child eating, of a woman fire-fighter working—then strive, over the long haul, to connect these images and bring them to life.

When it comes to the utopian prospect of creating new schools for the twenty-first century, we in the Coalition of Essential Schools try hard to stick to the second path. Our reason is as pragmatic as it is principled: in school reform, the first path generally offers a fool’s journey. So, for example, the quick instruments of the 1980s—longer school days and years, more testing of teachers and kids, more course requirements for high schools—seem to have made things worse. Meanwhile, the patient striving of some of the original members of the Coalition of Essential Schools—a creature as well of the 1980s—has turned scanty images of possibility into remarkable schools. These are schools that scout the future—schools like Deborah Meier’s Central Park East Secondary School in New York City and Dennis Littky’s Thayer High School in Winchester, New Hampshire.

Now, at the start of the 1990s, the lure of the quicker path again threatens the capacity of policymakers to focus on the long haul. Thus our schools face a number of proposals that mean to drive instruction. These proposals all involve assessment, and sometimes what is called alternative or authentic assessment. Their proponents suggest that clever instruments might be capable of directing schools toward worthy ends—yielding in a stroke the utopia of excellence and equity that many of us seek. Give schools the right test, so the argument goes, and the other elements of new school design will align like metal filaments to a magnet.

Unfortunately, the argument is more attractive than persuasive. It ignores the fact that schools are exceedingly complex organisms, responsive only in perverse ways to outside driving. This is especially true when the driver aims to enhance accountability. Real accountability depends in the end on the resolution of

school people to awaken to the effects of regularities that suppress their own best instincts, to come to terms with what Theodore R.Sizer has called the “essential dailiness of school”—its numbing habit of self-absorption and its preoccupation with simply churning on. One cannot be driven to such mindfulness; one can only be coached into it. Assessment can play an important role in the effort, but only if it aims to point out continually what schools might otherwise overlook to the detriment of their real mission. What is wanted is an assessment system perched powerfully within the school itself and just above the school’s other systems—one that from its perch might direct these other systems toward kids rather than toward their own smooth running. This is what the Coalition of Essential Schools means by exhibitions.

Ted Sizer reached all the way back to the eighteenth century in search of an assessment mechanism that might function in this way. He found at least the possibility of it in a ubiquitous feature of the early American academies and of the common schools that shared their era. The exhibition, as practiced then, was an occasion of public inspection when some substantial portion of a school’s constituency might show up to hear students recite, declaim, or otherwise perform. The constituency might thereby satisfy itself that the year’s public funds or tuitions had been well spent and that some cohort of young scholars was now ready to move on or out. There is evidence that this satisfaction came cheap. Arthur Powell, who has studied the matter, once told me that the exhibition as practiced in its own time was frequently little more than public entertainment, the equivalent of Friday night football in Odessa, Texas.

For his part, Sizer imagined this old design in something more contemporary than kerosene light; still, he prized its history and aimed to use it to help displace more recent historical influences on the design of the American high school. These are especially the ones that have lent the high school its division of knowledge into subjects, time into Carnegie units, and kids into tracks. Features of the exhibition, as Sizer projected them, run counter to these powerful norms: a suggestion that high school kids, like doctoral students, might qualify for graduation on the basis of some integrative performance; that they might attempt this performance when they were well enough prepared to attempt it, rather than on some fixed schedule; and that they might all be required to do it well, without regard to someone’s perception of their abilities, career prospects, or socio-economic status. Together with a number of imaginative school people—like Meier, Littky, and Samuel Billups (of Walbrook High School, Baltimore, Maryland), to name a few of the pioneers of the mid-1980s—and scholars like Arthur Powell and Grant Wiggins, Sizer launched a theoretical and practical adventure with exhibitions that continues today in the Coalition of Essential Schools.

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