

# School Vignette

## Integrating Performance Tasks in a Middle School Social Studies Department



Late afternoon sunlight streamed through the windows as Evelyn Cohen walked around the big table in the middle of her seventh-grade classroom. As Social Studies Department Chair at Johnson Middle School, she liked to start each weekly department meeting with a brief “do-now” activity. As her colleagues—fresh from their seventh-period classes—filed in, they groaned affectionately as they saw a slip of paper with two questions typed on it:

1. Studying for multiple-choice history tests gets my students excited about learning. True or False?
2. Which of the following would better help you understand how much your students learned from your most recent unit of study?
  - a. Seeing how well they had memorized names and dates related to the historical period
  - b. Watching each of them debate an issue related to the historical period with another student while they both draw on evidence from a variety of sources

The inspiration for the do-now activity was a recent one-on-one check-in between Cohen and her principal, John Taveras. Cohen explained to Taveras that the social studies teachers were struggling with how to integrate performance tasks into their unit tests because they thought they needed to cover *all* the content in the State social studies standards, a belief that lends itself to multiple-choice and short-answer questions. “It’s an issue of breadth versus depth,” Cohen explained. “Beyond that, they’re not all certain what a performance task is,” she added. “Some of the teachers wonder if this is just a fad, and

others like the idea in theory but aren’t sure how to go about writing, selecting or evaluating a really good task for their students, especially since the kids’ skill levels are all over the map.”

As part of an effort to address these issues, Cohen and Taveras arrived at a goal that seemed ambitious but achievable: each grade-level team within the social studies department would integrate one performance task into its next unit test, which was several weeks away. To prepare teachers to do this, they decided to use the [Assessment Design Toolkit](#)<sup>1</sup> to provide some insight into what a performance task is and how such tasks can be developed and scored.

Once the social studies faculty had assembled and discussed the do-now activity, Cohen turned the group’s attention to the screen at the front of the room to show them the video on the various types of assessment items. “The goal for this module is for you to be able to identify, describe and tell the difference between three different types of assessment items: selected response, constructed response and performance tasks,” she explained, before clicking “play.” She also passed out the accompanying note-taking template for teachers to use as they watched.

Once the video had concluded, Cohen led the group in a 10-minute discussion based on the “check for understanding” at the end of the module: *Compare and contrast the three types of assessment items we discussed in this module according to how students demonstrate learning.*

<sup>1</sup>The *Assessment Design Toolkit* was developed under the auspices of the Reform Support Network, with funding from the U.S. Department of Education under contract #GS-23F-8182H.

“One of the things that really resonated with me is the difference in cognitive complexity between simply asking students to select an option from a list and asking them to actually create a product or perform a task demonstrating mastery,” said one teacher.

“I’d always thought of ‘performance task’ as just another word for essay,” said another. “And I’ve been worried about finding the time to grade long essays on every single unit test and provide written feedback to each kid. But now I’m getting excited thinking about the fact that a debate or a speech could be a performance task. I could score kids’ speeches using a rubric in real time so that students could get quick feedback.”

“And seventh graders care so much about what their peers think of them,” interjected one of her colleagues. “Knowing they would have to get up in front of the class at the end of the unit would motivate some of my less engaged students to focus more on lessons along the way.” Several other teachers nodded in agreement.

“Our previous training on assessment focused on analyzing individual items and using that information to inform instruction,” explained a United States history teacher. “If I give a unit test on the Civil Rights Movement, and I learn that three-quarters of my class doesn’t know what Plessy versus Ferguson is, I can

reteach a couple of lessons on the events leading up to the passage of Jim Crow laws. But how do I know what to reteach from a performance task?” Other teachers voiced similar concerns, explaining that they needed to feel confident they had “permission” from Taveras to pick and choose the content their assessments would cover, as opposed to every unit test needing to be comprehensive. Cohen thanked her colleagues for their thoughtful responses and assured them she would share their insights with the principal.

By the end of the meeting, the teachers agreed to work toward the goal Cohen and Taveras had set out for them: to integrate one performance task into their next unit assessment. Cohen announced that during the next week’s meeting, the group would watch a video that delved more deeply into performance tasks. Then they would divide up into grade-level teams to brainstorm next steps, including writing or selecting high-quality performance tasks in their content areas.

As her colleagues left the room that afternoon, Cohen sat down at her desk tired but smiling. She knew there was a lot of work ahead of them, but the *Assessment Design Toolkit* had laid the groundwork for broadening her department’s approach to assessment—a development that she was sure would benefit their students’ learning for years to come.