

Educators air academic alternative to increased student testing

Montclair public schools could take a different route in assessing their students' academic achievement.

STAFF PHOTOS BY GEORGE WIRT

Above, at left, teacher Avram Barlowe describes his experiences with students at a school using performance-based assessments. Below, Ann Cook of the New York Standards Consortium fields questions from some of the more than 100 people who attended Sunday's Montclair Cares About Schools forum.

Members of the New York Performance Standards Consortium said the **Montclair** School District and other districts in New Jersey don't have to lock themselves into an expanded regime of standardized testing to gauge whether their students are meeting the recently adopted Common Core State Standards.

"The performance-based system allows students to show what they know and what they can do without resorting to high-stakes testing," Ann Cook, the Consortium's director told The **Montclair** Times. "I don't think there is any comparison between a high-stakes testing system and a system that uses performance-based assessment."

Cook's comments came following the **Montclair** Cares About Schools public forum Sunday afternoon on alternatives to student testing programs.

The nearly three-hour long session was cosponsored by MCAS, the **Bloomfield** Board of Education, the **Montclair** Education Association and by Save Our Schools New Jersey, and drew an audience of more than 100 from **Montclair** and several surrounding towns.

Increased student testing has become a controversial issue in **Montclair** since the Board of Education adopted a new strategic plan last summer calling for quarterly tests of most of its 6,600 students.

Some parents joined educators in opposing the additional tests arguing that they were putting too much pressure on students and were forcing teachers to teach to the exams.



The opposition led to the formation the MCAS and an online petition the group drafted urging the district to postpone implementation of the new testing schedule quickly drew more than 500 supporters. Sunday's meeting was the third forum on the subject organized by the MCAS.

"We had parents and educators from [Bloomfield](#), Highland Park, Newark, Princeton, Maplewood, South Orange, West Orange and New York City," said Michelle Fine, an MCAS founder.

Fine said "this is a moment for [Montclair](#) to take a serious look at authentic performance-based assessment."

In a performance-based system, students are encouraged to read more on subjects, analyze what they've read, and discuss it in class or write essays or papers on it, as opposed to the test-based system in which there is a greater emphasis on covering subject matter and memorizing information in preparing for standardized tests.

According to Cook, the kind of performance-based system used by more than two dozen high schools in New York City which are part of the Consortium has a proven track record over more than three decades of engaging students and better preparing them for college than systems relying heavily on testing.

To illustrate their argument, the Consortium presented Avram Barlowe, a teacher at Urban Academy in Manhattan who described in detail how the performance-based system allows teachers and students more academic creativity in the classroom.

The forum also heard from several students who have either graduated from, or currently attend schools using the performance-based model.

Elliot Garcia, a sophomore at Bard College, recalled that he was ready to drop out of high school until he went to Urban Academy.

"It was an alternative education that worked for me," Garcia said. "It's a system that shows students that their voice really does matter.

"We read a lot, analyzed what we read and the discuss it and we wrote about it," he said. "At the other schools I went to, we were just memorizing."

Barlowe suggested that New Jersey school administrators visit Consortium member schools and see the performance-based model for themselves.

"We're not saying that one size fits all," Barlowe said. "But when people see it at work they're going to want to try it."

The Consortium's presentation was viewed with great interest by officials from [Bloomfield](#) and [Montclair](#).

"This was very enlightening," said [Bloomfield](#) Schools Superintendent Salvatore Goncalves.

"The [Bloomfield](#) Board of Education is committed to the work against high-stakes testing," Goncalves explained. "I think that's very progressive and courageous of them. I'm glad to be a superintendent that can be part of this."

Third Ward [Montclair](#) Township Councilman Sean Spiller said he hopes the [Montclair](#) Board of Education would consider the Consortium's experience.

"I'm not trying to dictate education policy," said Spiller, "But I would hope the Board of Education is listening to the many voices and concerns of the community, and to the ideas we heard here among others."

Second Ward Township Councilwoman Robin Schlager said she was impressed by the perspectives offered by the students from the New York City high schools who spoke at the forum.

"I was surprised to hear from the students about the anxiety that the testing was causing, and the negative impact it was having on them," she said. "It was reassuring to hear that the performance-based system made them feel more at ease."

Stan Karp, a longtime [Montclair](#) resident and director of the Secondary Reform Project for the New Jersey Educational Law Center, said the transition to the Common Core standards offers districts an opportunity to review and rethink their assessment strategies.

"Even though we may disagree over the policies, there are a lot of people who are talking about the same thing, in terms of looking for a more authentic way to assess kids, and better ways to prepare kids for what they'll have to do in the real world," said Karp.

"The performance-based system is a powerful model with a proven track record," he said. "It's definitely something we should look at."

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