

GreenTalks at Boston Green Academy: Student Reflections on Performance Assessment

by Christina Kuriacose

High school students reflect on their participation in GreenTalks, a public exhibition of their research on food justice issues in Boston. Interviews conducted by Christina Kuriacose, Program Associate, Quality Performance Assessment, Center for Collaborative Education

In spring 2017, for the third year running, 10th graders at Boston Green Academy (BGA) presented GreenTalks, a showcase of research on food justice issues. The day I visited the school, students were presenting the PowerPoints they had put together. All of them included a map plotting out the proximity of their neighborhood or BGA to grocery stores, bodegas, and fast food restaurants. This mapping was meant to show where there is limited access to healthy food in the areas most students were living in. Almost all the presenters commented on the lack of proximity to grocery stores, where it is easiest to get fresh produce. The presentations additionally included the data from student-conducted surveys. These surveys asked statements and questions ranging from "I know someone who has diabetes," to "If I had more access to healthy foods I'd eat it more often" to "How often do you eat fast food?" The students represented this data in pie charts or bar graphs. Some of the presenters spoke about nutrition programs in other countries and others about local healthy food programs, in order to highlight ways to increase access to healthy foods in less affluent areas.



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Issue 47

Performance Assessment:
A Deeper Look at Practice
and Research

This issue is an online supplement to VUE 46, which addressed the topic of performance assessment – a personalized and rigorous alternative to standardized testing that allows teachers to build on individual students' strengths and foster more equitable learning outcomes.

VUE 47 adds additional current materials, offers opportunities for additional voices, and provides more examples of performance assessment. Because performance assessment is an active national conversation, the work continues; following VUE 46's publication, important national conferences and other milestones occurred that we're able to share here. This issue also provides perspectives from students, educators, researchers, and policymakers.

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Some of the calls to action at the end of presentations included:

- We need to lobby the government to subsidize healthy food.
- Local community gardens will provide fresh produce options to neighborhoods far away from grocery stores.
- Access to healthy food is a social justice issue that we need to rally around.

In a conversation with several participating students, I asked about the process of moving through this performance assessment. One student described her GreenTalk as “an end-of-the-year presentation that we do based on what we have been learning about in all our classes for the last few months. This year the focus was food in Boston. We could choose to research the availability of food in either Boston or our school.” Another student added, “We were talking about food scarcity in all of our classes. You could really see the connections, because we kept coming back to the same topic in math, English, social studies.”

For these students, this long-term research was the most extensive project they had been asked to take on by that point in their academic careers. When asked about what she thought when first encountering the GreenTalks performance assessment task, one student responded with trepidation, “You want us to do what? It was really overwhelming and looked like a lot of work. I didn’t really know how to get started. But then it was easier to see the connections between the different classes and how that built towards the project.”

Another student agreed that initial anxiety about the GreenTalk subsided as they delved into the work. “It’s a lot harder than what we are used to. At first, I was thinking, I’d rather just write an essay or something, like the sort of stuff we do in other classes. I wasn’t excited at all. But once I chose my topic, I began to get more into it. It’s connected to our lives; it’s closer to my real life than a lot of other stuff we do.”

Student got to choose to work on city-wide food issues or the quality of food at school. One student observed, “I chose to do food in Boston because it was easier. Doing the research was easy because I’m researching my life. I just talked with friends and my family about where they get food from and the quality of food they can get and I had all the information I needed.”

A student who focused on food at BGA said, “I chose food at BGA because it’s not very good. I wanted to show teachers what we think of food and what we would like to see.” This student offered the conclusion that it is inefficient to ship food for the Boston Public Schools from a production factory in Long Island, New York, noting also that the food isn’t fresh by the time it makes it to Boston, and that it would be better to invest in local companies to provide the food for schools.

When asked to reflect on the differences between the GreenTalks project and assessments they had done in the past, students described their own

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learning curves. “At first, I thought it was pointless,” said one student. “But I appreciate the independence of it all. I’m so used to having a right answer and right way of doing things, so when we were given this big open-ended project, it didn’t connect clearly to class. But as I got started, I saw how I was using what I learned in my own way. It was cool because I was using stuff from class in a way that was relevant to my life.” Another student agreed, observing, “I’d rather do this because it’s more fun. It’s easier because you have a lot of people doing the same thing and you can get more help. If there is something you don’t really get, you can ask another student. We helped each other out in doing the research and developing the projects.”

Offering final thoughts for educators in the process of developing assessments, one of BGA’s 10th graders offered sage advice. “Every student learns in a different way. Make projects that allow for that. There needs to be visual teaching and hands-on learning. Some people need that for things to really click.”

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