This practical guide is designed to help English language arts teachers incorporate authentic forms of assessment into the middle and high school curriculum.

Grounded in the latest theories, Joanna Dolgin, Kim Kelly, and Sarvenaz Zelkha offer real-world examples, sample student work, step-by-step instructions, and handouts to help teachers:

- Incorporate independent reading and authentic assessments through lessons, handouts, and examples of student work
- Facilitate a schoolwide end-of-semester roundtable assessment and portfolio presentations for middle and high school students and visitors
- Design twelfth-grade assessments that draw on the independent reading and critical writing experiences students have had throughout their academic careers

The book also provides sample curricula and highlights the assessment tools of three different teachers who have extensive experience teaching sixth through twelfth grade. Tips are offered on developing a yearlong curriculum focused on social, political, and emotional relevancy to students’ lives, as well as cultivating the skills needed to succeed on standardized tests.
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The middle of January every year:

“Ok, so, next week you guys will be taking the English Regents.”

Groans.

“I know. I know, but it’s something you have to pass to graduate high school. It’s just a test of critical reading and writing and that is something you’ve all been doing all year.”

Blank stares.

“So . . . it’s a six-hour test, three hours each . . .”

“What?” A student interrupts.

“Six hours?” Another student interjects.

“Yes.” I take a deep breath because, as a class, we have had this discussion more than once before, and I know where it will end. “Six hours. It is three hours each day and you have two days to take it.”

“Six hours?”

“Yes, but over two days. Just think of it this way—they are giving you plenty of time to show your skills. Use the time to your advantage. Now . . .” As I continue to present the students with more pointers to approaching the test, I can feel their heartbeats quicken, see their pupils dilate, hear their breathing grow heavier.

One student who has yet to succumb to test anxiety asks a question. “So, is this test on the stuff we’ve been doing in class?”

I pause and think. “Yes and no.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means, yes, it’s on critical reading and writing, but no because they will give you all new texts to read and analyze on the exam. First you will listen to a passage and write a response, then you will read a nonfiction passage and write a response, then you will read two short literary pieces and write a response, and for the final part you will connect two books you have read to a quote they
provide. So, you’re really just flexing your writing muscles and your ability to think critically about different texts. And again, they give you a lot of time. . . .”

“So, all the stuff we have to read and write about on the test will be new to us?”

“Yes.” I reply with a somewhat desperate smile in recognition of the anxiety that is spreading through the room.

There are myriad pressures associated with high-stakes standardized tests. These pressures affect students, teachers and their classrooms, and administrators. Students feel they are judged or labeled by tests alone. Teachers feel they are not trusted to adequately assess and evaluate their own students and curriculum. Administrators feel they must meet quotas in terms of passing rates and cutoffs so that the school is not labeled as failing (Kohn 27–29). All of this combines to create a dangerous environment that may lead schools away from authentic learning and assessment. It is our belief that it is possible to provide authentic and more nuanced definitions of success within schools. By authentic we mean assessments that are developed by teachers in conjunction with course curriculum, that provide students with clear feedback and understanding about their strengths and growth in English, that require higher-order thinking skills, and that hold students to high standards while rooted in real-world scenarios. We believe that, in addition to standardized tests, we should use assessments that allow students a variety of means to display their skills and to be held accountable for their weaknesses. Furthermore, these assessments provide teachers with an authentic way of gauging understanding in their classrooms and give administrators a more complete picture of the learning that happens in their school. Like Grant Wiggins, we believe that “assessment anchors teaching and authentic tasks anchor assessment” (7).

About Our School

East Side Community High School is a small 6–12 middle/high school located on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Our mission is as follows: East Side Community High School is committed to the belief that all students can, must, and will learn. We set high standards for each student and help them meet these standards by providing personal attention, a safe and respectful environment, a strong sense of community, and a curriculum that is both challenging and engaging. Approximately 85 percent of our student body is eligible for free lunch. The racial breakdown is 60 percent Latino, 30 percent African American, and 10 percent white or Asian. Many of our students enter East Side as strug-
gling readers and writers. Many of our students have or need an Individualized Education Plan. Other students could be labeled gifted. This reality makes it critical that we differentiate our teaching and promote the use of a wide variety of assessments, both within curricular units and at the end of a semester or year, so that all students can find an entry point to successful learning. Rather than relying solely on anxiety-inducing standardized tests, we provide more individualized ways for students to express their learning. They are able to express their knowledge in writing through an extensive cover letter that addresses the content of the class, as well as through a reflection on their own performance, or they can defend their ideas orally in the roundtable presentation.

In the spring of 2008, for the second year in a row, our school received a “well-developed” on our school quality review, an intensive onsite examination of the school conducted by outside professionals. In their review, some of their summative points were as follows:

- The school sets very high expectations for students’ work habits and achievement through well-researched individual goals.
- The school is a powerful learning community directed to students’ academic and social progress and very well supported by professional development.
- The school’s priority goal for students to become readers is very successful and engenders an extraordinary love of books (New York City Department of Education, 2008).

In addition to this school quality review, the New York City Department of Education has given East Side an A on our school report card for both the middle and the high school each year since the report card system was implemented.

Because of the socioeconomic demographics of our school and our belief that education should be equal for all, we also find the research of Alfred Tatum highly useful because as he stresses the importance of relevant curriculum and authentic assessment. We agree with him that the achievement gap can be closed with socially accessible curricula (Tatum 54). Using backward planning and a curriculum focused on authentic assessment allows us to create units that are socially, politically, and emotionally relevant while equipping students with high academic as well as real-world skills. However, though Tatum’s major focus of research is on young African American men, his ideas are applicable to all students no matter their race, class, gender, or location. We do not want intellectually challenging and authentic assessment just for students at East Side; we want this for all young people as we believe it will make for a stronger, more thoughtful, and more dynamic future for our country.
Educational equality is also one of the goals for standardized testing that is not working. While in theory standardized tests should reduce educational inequality, "In states where ‘high-stakes testing’ is the primary policy reform, disproportionate numbers of minority, low-income, and special needs students have failed tests for promotion and graduation, leading to grade retention, failure to graduate, and sanctions for schools, without efforts to ensure equal and adequate teaching, texts, curriculum, and other educational resources" (Darling-Hammond 1). This does not spell out educational equality, and we firmly believe a shift to more authentic means of assessment will do more to make educational equality a reality. This is an issue of great importance for our school and our nation. In the wake of No Child Left Behind, we find ourselves in “a situation in which what may have started out in some educators’ and legislators’ minds as an attempt to make things better, [but] in the end is all usually transformed into another set of mechanisms for social stratification” (Apple 198).

By choice, East Side is a member school of the New York Performance Standards Consortium (NYPSC). The consortium is a coalition of high schools across New York State which have pioneered the creation of educational communities synonymous with active student learning, exemplary professional development, and innovative curriculum and teaching strategies for 21st century students. . . . Consortium schools have devised a system of assessment which consists of eight components including alignment with state standards, professional development, external review, and formative and summative data. Consortium schools have documented how their work meets and exceeds New York State Regents standards through a system of rigorous commencement-level performance-based assessment tasks. (Alternatives to High-Stakes Testing, www.performanceassessment.org)

Ample data have been compiled by external committees and school reviews sponsored by the Department of Education to assess the effectiveness of this approach. In New York City, the overall dropout rate is 38.9 percent, whereas it is only 9.9 percent at consortium schools. Citywide acceptance rate to college is 62 percent, whereas at consortium schools it is 91 percent (FAQs, www.performanceassessment.org). Through use of performance-based assessments such as roundtables with portfolio review, screenplay panel presentations, and independent reading exit projects that will be outlined in this book, East Side has become one of these schools that experiences success with low dropout rates and high college acceptance rates.

In the Educational Leadership article "Measuring What Matters," Mike Schmoker questions the validity of standardized testing while promoting the
work being done in the consortium—the group of schools in New York City to which East Side belongs that promote alternative assessment. The reality is that “schools and even whole states could make steady gains on standardized tests without offering students intellectually challenging tasks” (Schmoker 71). This, too, is critical to the decision to begin to incorporate more alternative or authentic forms of assessment in the classroom. It is our belief that we should not settle for gains in standardized testing if it means that students are not being challenged intellectually. While the push for standardized tests was supposed to improve standards, it has actually served to lower them. “States and districts that have relied primarily on test-based accountability, emphasizing sanctions for students, have often produced greater failure rather than greater success for their most educationally vulnerable students” (Darling-Hammond 2). Research has shown that standardized tests narrow the curriculum, push instruction to lower-order cognitive thinking skills, and lead to distortion of scores (Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey, & Stecher; Koretz and Barron; Linn).

Although East Side is a consortium school that is exempt from most New York State Regents exams, all students are still required to take some standardized tests. All students must take the high-stakes, state-mandated English language arts (ELA) tests in middle school and high school to be promoted and/or graduate. However, we stand firm in our philosophy that if teachers are creating challenging curricula with authentic assessment, then our students will be well equipped with the skills to master any state exam as well as be prepared for college. In the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, students must take a state-mandated standardized ELA exam that rates them from Level One (the lowest) to Level Four (the highest). By the end of eighth grade, 59 percent of students score a Level Two and 35 percent score a Level Three. The next required state English exam is in January of eleventh grade. On average, more than 80 percent of students pass the comprehensive English Regents on their first try, and 100 percent pass within three attempts. Beyond just passing, on average, more than 65 percent score above a 75. Though we experience success on standardized tests, our intent is never to “teach to the test.”

For us, the opinion of the parents regarding student learning is paramount. In a 2006 Gallup Poll, only 17 percent of parents believed standardized tests were a valid measure of student learning, whereas in a survey of more than 800 consortium parents, only 8 percent thought so. The consortium survey also stated that 93 percent of parents preferred teacher assessment, compared to only 39 percent that trusted testing corporations’ assessments. Ninety-two percent of parents trusted the child’s teacher to prepare the student for college-level work, and 95 percent believed their child’s teachers had a good idea of their child’s strengths and weaknesses (Parent Survey, www.performanceassessment.
Parents’ trust in teachers over standardized tests is a cornerstone of our philosophy. Though the mandates of No Child Left Behind may have presented hope through standardized tests, it has become clear over the past six years that “NCLB rests on false assumptions—e.g., test scores equal educational quality” (No Child Left Behind After Six Years: An Escalating Track Record of Failure, http://www.fairtest.org). Through the networking of Fair Test.org, more than 150 education, civil rights, religious, and other organizations have signed the joint organizational statement calling for an overhaul of No Child Left Behind that moves the law away from testing and punishing schools and toward helping schools improve their capacity to serve all children well. We believe we are on this road at East Side by providing all students with different avenues of learning and more authentic and engaging ways of exhibiting their understanding of what they learn.

Philosophically, our school does not believe in state-mandated exams as the best measure of success. Rather, we believe that a well-constructed curriculum with high standards for all students and differentiated approaches to learning will prepare students for a variety of assessments, performance-based or test-based, and, more important, for success in college and beyond. Alfie Kohn states in The Case against Standardized Tests that the arguments for standardized tests are as follows:

1. They are an objective measure of achievement.
2. They improve accountability, or proof that schools are helping students learn.
3. They provide measured outcomes.

At East Side we believe “measurable outcomes [from standardized test] may be the least significant results of learning. . . . [S]tandardized tests punish the thinking test taker” (Kohn 4). We feel strongly about encouraging our students to be thinkers and to be able to exhibit their different habits of mind in performance-based assessments that are authentic and engage the students in their own learning process. We do not believe classroom time should be spent on prepping for tests but rather on “real learning” (Kohn 26). We believe that a student who is able to orally defend his or her understanding of curricular content in a roundtable presentation, or run a thirty-minute discussion on a sophisticated novel, or write a proposal letter to a film company explaining why a novel he or she read should be made into a movie, is held accountable for his or her own learning. The assessments are grounded in the curriculum we have developed to emphasize scholarly and real-world skills. The curriculum allows students to internalize, synthesize, and express skills to others. Authentic assessment is connected
to both our high standards with literacy and our desire to promote “Accountable Talk,” developed by Sarah Michaels and Catherine O’Connor through the Institute for Learning. This “sharpens students’ thinking by reinforcing their ability to use and create knowledge” (*The Principles of Learning*, http://www.instituteforlearning.org). To convince adults of students’ understanding of the content, authentic assessment requires that the students must have a deep level of understanding. Using these assessments signifies what we value at East Side—a value different than the standardized norm and a hope for change of that norm—because “assessment is a direct representation of what we value and how we assign that value” (Huot 8).

To create accountable assessments that are authentic and engaging, teachers at East Side use a type of backward curriculum planning modeled on the ideas promoted by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe in *Understanding by Design*. The concept of this type of curricular planning is to start with the big ideas and/or concepts that students should understand within a unit and spend time creating assessment tools that will allow teachers to measure students’ understanding of those ideas. Basically, we want to think about where the students will be—what they will have learned and know—at the end of the unit, the year, and, ultimately, their time at East Side. In the context of our school, relevancy is key to both the development of curriculum and assessments. As Alfred Tatum promotes, we believe in an empowering curriculum that focuses on “engaging students with text and discussion about real issues they face . . . using meaningful literacy activities . . . [and] connecting the social, the economic, and the political to the educational” (Tatum 54). This is reflected in our unit plans and our assessments. Wiggins and McTighe define assessment as “the act of determining the extent to which curricular goals are being and have been achieved” (4). Assessments do not have to be alternative—they may include quizzes, essays, short-answer tests, reports—but there does need to be a variety of them and they do need to be authentic.

The focus of this book is on authentic assessment in English classrooms, assessments that can be adapted to other classroom environments. We provide a brief outline of the curriculum and highlight the assessment tools of three different teachers within the school who have extensive experience teaching sixth through twelfth grade. The first part gives an in-depth description of our independent reading program. Our independent reading program is rooted in the philosophies set forth by Richard Allington: (a) students need a protected time to read; (b) students must be able to choose books they love; and (c) they are immersed in a curriculum that cares about them (3–4). The independent reading program is a pillar of our school community and begins in sixth grade. Every
student at East Side engages in thirty minutes of sustained silent reading every
day in grades 6–10 and three days a week in grades 11–12. The independent
reading program culminates with a project during the twelfth-grade year in
which students must engage an adult in forty minutes of conversation about a
novel they have both read. This project is an alternative assessment that allows
the students to show their ownership over independent reading. We describe
this assessment in great contextual detail, allowing teachers and administrators
to see how it works in our school and that the project could be adapted in some
form to another environment.

The second part of the book explains and provides the step-by-step process
for roundtables and portfolio presentations at East Side. It is our belief that the
roundtable is authentic because in the “assessment of performance we thereby
learn whether students can intelligently use what they have learned in situa-
tions that increasingly approximate adult situations” (Wiggins 21). Roundtables
are an end-of-semester and end-of-year assessment used in all classes at East
Side Community High School. They are a highly valued assessment that often
becomes a celebration of student work, knowledge, and skills. We detail the
rationale at our school for using roundtables and the evolution of the portfolio
process within the context of East Side, and suggest ways that different schools
could include similar processes.

The third part focuses on developing a yearlong curriculum focused on
social, political, and emotional relevancy to students’ lives with a variety of
alternative assessments during the same semester in which the students have
to take a high-stakes exam. This part offers a step-by-step explanation of how to
use Understanding by Design to generate alternative and authentic assessments
for curricular units. We offer a side-by-side breakdown of the skills developed
within the curriculum and the skills needed to succeed on the standardized test.
This section also provides a detailed explanation of an end-of-year assessment
that can be used as an alternative to the roundtable format that is outlined in Part
2. This assessment, a screenplay panel proposal presentation, focuses not only
on the content of the curriculum but also on public speaking skills in a simulated
professional environment. This part shows how assessments are designed to
clearly allow students to exhibit their understanding of the goals set forth at the
beginning of the unit, and should have some relevancy to real-world situations.
Students should be able to do this during the unit, at the end of the unit, and
at the culmination of the semester and year. As Wiggins and McTighe state, “a
central premise of our argument is that understanding can be developed and
evoked only through multiple methods of assessment” (4).

Each part of the book refers to handouts (available in the appendix) used by
teachers and sample student work to add depth to the explanations. We have
chosen to focus on independent reading, roundtables, and curricular design around assessment (including an alternative roundtable format) because these three elements have been crucial to the success of our students in terms of overall literacy, college entrance, and self-esteem.
This practical guide is designed to help English language arts teachers incorporate authentic forms of assessment into the middle and high school curriculum. Grounded in the latest theories, Joanna Dolgin, Kim Kelly, and Sarvenaz Zelkha offer real-world examples, sample student work, step-by-step instructions, and handouts to help teachers:

- Incorporate independent reading and authentic assessments through lessons, handouts, and examples of student work
- Facilitate a schoolwide end-of-semester roundtable assessment and portfolio presentations for middle and high school students and visitors
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