

Maximizing the Power of Formative Assessments

When teachers work together to create assessments for all students in the same course or grade, the results can be astounding.

By Rick Stiggins and Rick DuFour

Formative assessment, done well, represents one of the most powerful instructional tools available to a teacher or a school for promoting student achievement. Teachers and schools can use formative assessment to identify student understanding, clarify what comes next in their learning, trigger and become part of an effective system of intervention for struggling students, inform and improve the instructional practice of individual teachers or teams, help students track their own progress toward attainment of standards, motivate students by building confidence in themselves as learners, fuel continuous improvement processes across faculties, and, thus, drive a school's transformation.

Common assessments — those created collaboratively by teams of teachers who teach the same course or grade level — also represent a powerful tool in effective assessment in professional learning communi-

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ties. Put the two together and the result can redefine the role of assessment in school improvement.

But this synergy can be achieved only if certain conditions are satisfied. Three specific questions: How can common formative assessments contribute to productive instructional decision making? How can we make sure those assessments are of high quality? How can we ensure they are used in ways that benefit student learning? Our driving purpose is to maximize the positive impact of common assessments used to promote both student and teacher success.

ASSESSMENT AND INSTRUCTIONAL DECISION MAKING

If assessment is, at least in part, the process of gathering information to inform instructional decisions, then the starting place for the creation of any particular assessment is seeking clear answers to some key questions (Stiggins 2008):

- What is (are) the instructional decision(s) to be made?
- Who will be making the decision(s)?

- What information will help them make good decisions?

Answers will differ depending on the assessment's purpose. To be truly productive, a local district assessment system must provide different kinds of information to various decision makers in different forms and at different times.

THREE LEVELS OF ASSESSMENTS

Consider how assessments provide information for three different levels — the classroom level, the program level, and the institutional or accountability levels.

Classroom assessments. At the classroom level, students, teachers, and sometimes parents need information about what comes next in the learning process and continuous evidence about a student's location in that learning progression.

Teachers should have arrayed clearly focused and appropriate achievement standards into learning progressions to unfold within and across grade levels over time. These curriculum maps chart the learner's route to ultimate academic success. A balanced classroom assessment environment uses some assessments in a formative manner to support learning and some in a summative way to verify it, as at grading time.

To know what comes next in the learning, one must know where the students are now in their learning. Formative classroom assessments must provide an answer about where a student is located in his or her learning, not once a year or every few weeks, but *continuously* while the learning is happening. Effective classroom assessments clarify *each* student's journey up the scaffolding leading to each standard. It is never the case that, first, a student cannot meet a standard and then, all at once, he or she can. Over time, the student masters progressive levels of prerequisite learning that accumulate to mastery of the standard. Ongoing classroom assessment must track that progress in order to know, at any point in time, what comes next in the learning. Such continuous, ongoing assessment is essential to a balanced classroom assessment system.

This attention to each student does not require that every assessment be unique to each student or classroom. While the realities of day-to-day classroom instructional decision making will require some unique assessments, assessments at this level can also be developed and used commonly across classrooms to identify and help struggling students.

School-level assessments. At the school level,

teacher teams, teacher leaders, principals, and curriculum personnel need periodic, but frequent, evidence that is comparable across classrooms. Such information will reveal whether students are mastering standards.

In this case, teachers use frequent interim benchmark or short-cycle assessments to identify components of an instructional program that are working effectively and those that need improvement. These assessments will be common across classrooms as instructional programs are adopted and implemented for schools.

In professional learning communities, collaborative teams of teachers create common assessments for three formative purposes. First, team-developed common assessments help identify curricular areas that need attention because many students are struggling. Second, they help each team member clarify strengths and weaknesses in his or her teaching and create a forum for teachers to learn from one another. Third, interim common assessments identify students who aren't mastering the intended standards and need timely and systematic interventions.

Institutional-level assessments. Finally, superintendents, school boards, and legislators need annual summaries of whether students are meeting required standards. This information will come from standardized accountability tests.

Once again, assessments serve formative or summative purposes. Summative applications are most common at this level: Did the students achieve the standard by the deadline? Yes or no? Pass or fail? Proficient or not proficient? Schools are required to administer annual standardized assessments to all students in certain grade levels revealing the proportion of students mastering standards so as to evaluate the overall institutional impact. But these kinds of common assessments can also serve formative purposes if they're designed and analyzed to reveal how each student did in mastering each standard. As at the school level, these permit teachers to identify standards where students struggle and to use that information for program improvement.

Note the differences. Thus, all three levels of assessment are important because they can serve multiple purposes, including formative. The classroom level continuously asks, how goes the journey to competence for each student? The program level asks, how can we improve our programs and our teaching and which students require more time and support for their learning? And the institutional level asks, are schools as effective as they need to be? No single as-

assessment can answer all of these questions. A productive, multi-level assessment system is needed to ensure that all users are served so all instructional decisions can be made well.

Similarly, different users are served at the three levels. The classroom assessment serves students as they decide whether success is within reach for them and discover how to approach that learning productively. It informs teachers and students as they track what comes next in the learning, figure out how to promote that learning, identify what feedback is likely to support learning, and determine how to judge the sufficiency of each student's progress. At the school level, faculty teams use results to clarify program areas needing attention, to examine the relative effectiveness of each member's instructional strategies for each essential standard, and to identify students who need immediate intervention to acquire the

intended knowledge and skills. At the institutional level, matters of leadership effectiveness, instructional policy, resource allocation, and other such broad program variables come under the microscope. An effective balanced assessment system will meet the needs of all of these formative users and uses.

In other words, all parts of the system must contribute for schools to be truly effective. If assessment isn't working effectively day to day in the classroom — that is, if poor decisions are being made because of misinformation due to inept assessment — then the program or institutional levels of assessment can't compensate. They don't provide the right kinds of information. By the same token, an individual teacher's classroom assessment doesn't provide the data needed to compare and evaluate either programs or strengths and weaknesses in his or her teaching. Frequent com-

The Story of Snow Creek



Snow Creek Elementary School is a small rural school in Franklin County, Virginia, with more than half of its students eligible for free and reduced lunch. Snow Creek students traditionally had been assigned to an individual classroom teacher who was solely responsible for monitoring each student's learning and responding when a student experienced difficulty. In the spring of 2004, only 40% of Snow Creek's students met the reading proficiency on the Virginia state assessment; the state average was 71%.

In the 2004-05 school year, principal Bernice Cobbs assigned teachers to collaborative teams. Each team was asked to develop frequent common formative assessments, to monitor each student's learning of each essential skill on a frequent and timely basis, and to identify immediately students experiencing difficulty. Finally, the school created a schedule to provide systematic interventions at each grade level to ensure that struggling students received additional time and intensive support for learning each day in ways that did not pull them from the classroom during new direct instruction. During that intervention period, classroom teachers were joined by special education teachers and assistants, a Title I specialist, two part-time tutors hired using state remedial funds, and often, principal Cobbs. All students of a particular grade level were divided among this army of professionals. Students experiencing difficulty were assigned to work with the teacher or teachers whose students had demonstrated the best results on the common assessment. Another staff member would lead students who had demonstrated high proficiency in an enrichment activity. Yet another might supervise a different group of students during a teacher read aloud or silent sustained reading, and still another might supervise students at independent learning centers. Groups were fluid, with students moving from group to group as they demonstrated proficiency.

In less than two years, Snow Creek had become a Title I Distinguished school. Students surpassed the state performance in every subject area and every grade level. The same group of students that had only 40% of its members demonstrate proficiency in 3rd-grade reading had 96% of those students achieve proficient status by 5th grade. Math proficiency for the same cohort jumped from 70% to 100%.

At Snow Creek, common assessments were used not only to monitor the program, but also to respond to each student's immediate learning needs in a coordinated and systematic way. Frequent assessments informed both teachers and students of problems and helped to resolve the problems in ways that had a dramatic positive impact on student learning.

mon classroom assessments, however, can provide a teacher with that information. So clearly, students benefit when we seek the synergy of classroom and interim assessments and use those assessments to identify specific standards students are struggling to learn and teachers are struggling to teach.

THE STRUCTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF PRODUCTIVE ASSESSMENT

To build a balanced and effective assessment system to work productively at all levels, four essential conditions must be satisfied.

Condition #1: Clear learning targets. Effective assessment requires a framework of clear learning targets that are:

- Centered on the best thinking about the most important learnings of the field of study;
- Integrated into learning progressions within and across grades;
- Within developmental reach of students;
- Manageable given the resources and time to teach and learn them; and
- Mastered by teachers charged with helping students achieve them.

If these criteria aren't met, then the quality of assessments across levels and, therefore, the effectiveness of instruction will suffer. So the starting place for the development of a balanced assessment system is verifying the quality of the learning targets to be assessed.

Condition #2: A commitment to standards-based instruction. Clarity of expectations can affect student achievement positively only when teachers define their mission as one of ensuring that *all* students learn. Without that commitment, assessments remain merely tools for grading, sorting, selecting, and ranking students, and teachers will have little reason to explore ways of improving their instructional effectiveness.

Condition #3: High-quality assessment. Whether intended for use in one or many classrooms, assessments must be designed to provide a high-fidelity representation of the valued learning targets. This requires that the assessment's authors:

- Select a proper assessment method appropriate for the learning target being assessed;
- Build each assessment from quality ingredients, whether multiple-choice test items, performance or essay tasks, or scoring guides and rubrics;
- Include enough sample items to gather evidence

sufficient for a confident conclusion about achievement;

- Anticipate and eliminate all relevant sources of bias that can distort results; and
- Communicate results effectively to the intended users.

Condition 4: Effective communication. All of the work to develop quality assessments is wasted if teachers don't have a process for delivering assessment results in a *timely and understandable* form.

For effective communication, both teachers and students must learn the results of assessments as early as reasonable. Results should focus on attributes of the student's work, not on attributes of the student as a learner. The results must be descriptive rather than judgmental, informing the learner how to do better the next time. Results must arrive in a timely manner and be clearly and completely understood. Finally, the recipient of the message must be able to act on the message.

For these conditions to be satisfied, all involved must agree from the outset on the achievement target to be assessed and communicated, and the symbols used to convey the information from the message sender to the receiver must carry a common meaning for both.

MAXIMIZING THE POWER OF COMMON FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

With these four universal keys to productive assessment in mind, consider the potential power of common assessments developed by collaborative teams of teachers within the context of professional learning communities.

Common assessments can serve multiple purposes. Classroom assessments that aid day-to-day instructional decisions can be unique to a classroom or they can be created by a team of teachers and used commonly across classrooms. When they are common and intended for formative use, teachers can pool their collective wisdom in making sound instructional decisions based on results. They can identify what has and hasn't worked and which students are struggling and which are not. This enables them to bring their collective expertise to bear on behalf of student success. Common assessments can establish where each student is now in the learning progression and where students are collectively across classrooms, thus serving the information needs of both teachers and students.

Common assessments can contribute to learning target clarity. Before a team can develop a common

assessment, members must first clarify the specific knowledge and understanding, reasoning proficiencies, performance skills, and product development capabilities each student is to master. To create a common assessment, team members must build shared knowledge of relevant state standards, district curriculum guides, state assessment frameworks, and the expectations of the teachers in the next course or grade level in order to clarify the intended learning for students. Rather than interpreting standards in isolation, team members ensure that they share similar interpretations of standards and are assigning similar priorities to each.

Deconstructing standards into the scaffolding students will climb to arrive at the intended learning is best done, not by individuals working in isolation but by teams and professional interaction within a professional learning community.

Common assessments can contribute to assessment quality. The team structure provides a powerful format by which teachers can learn how to create high-quality assessments. A team working with the benefit of clearly defined learning targets and enhanced assessment literacy is in a position to create high-quality assessments that foster student learning.

To illustrate, a team can apply the keys to quality in developing performance assessments. Team members must agree on criteria for assessing student work and then practice applying those criteria until they can score the work consistently (that is, until they establish inter-rater reliability). This dialogue fosters both greater clarity of the learning standard to be

achieved and higher quality assessments.

Common assessments can enhance communication. Clarity regarding achievement expectations and the methods for gathering evidence of student learning can help a team create a common vision. Furthermore, if teachers transform those learning targets into student-friendly terms and share them with their students from the beginning of instruction, evidence of learning can be more quickly and easily communicated to and understood by students. As a result, students and teachers can collaborate in pinpointing what comes next in the learning and acting on that information.

STUDENT-INVOLVED COMMON ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

While we tend to think of assessment as something adults do to students to verify their learning, students also assess themselves. This reality also can feed into the productive use of common formative assessments.

For example, if the learning process starts with student-friendly versions of learning targets, students can become partners in creating and using practice assessments. Practice events can focus student attention on the keys to success and show students their progress as they move toward mastering standards. This understanding of learning targets and practice with such assessments enables students to become partners in interpreting results of common assessments and brainstorming how to respond when results show that students struggle across classrooms to master certain standards. Throughout this phase, to the extent that students are involved in the practice assessment and record-keeping processes, they will develop the conceptual understanding and vocabulary needed to communicate effectively with others about their achievement and improvement over time. Such involvement has been linked to profound gains in student learning (Hattie and Timperley 2007).

In the final analysis, the ultimate test of effective assessment is simple — does it provide teachers and students with the information they need to ensure that all students learn at higher levels. **K**

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