

THE
PERFECT
ASSESSMENT
— SYSTEM —

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CONFRONTING OUR ASSESSMENT CRISIS: IT'S TIME TO START OVER

If measurement is to continue to play an increasingly important role in education, those who measure must be more than technicians. Unless their efforts are directed by a sound educational philosophy, unless they accept and welcome a greater share of responsibility for the selection and clarification of educational objectives, unless they show much more concern with what they measure as well as with how they measure it, much of their work will prove futile and ineffective.

—E. F. LINDQUIST

In this book, I call for the ground-up redevelopment of assessment in American education. I describe why this is necessary and how to go about it in specific detail. But I want readers to understand from the outset both the experiences and resulting value perspectives (perhaps even moral code) that give rise to the vision I present.

First, I was a struggling learner in my public schooling years. My experiences taught me how devastating hopelessness can be in the classroom and why it's so important for every learner to believe in the possibility of his or her success.

Second, I have spent my career in educational measurement studying and working in classrooms with students and teachers, watching very expensive standardized testing processes unfold in ways that rarely supported the

learning that was going on in those classrooms. Policymakers have paid little attention and allocated virtually no resources in support of the classroom level of assessment, where its power to enhance learning is unlimited.

Third, I have worked extensively with local school leaders as they have tried to succeed in politicized assessment environments within which they have little understanding and over which they have no control. They long for assessment pathways to improved teaching, learning, and student well-being, and they find few.

In this book, I speak for all learners who hope to succeed, for the teachers who want them to succeed, and for local school leaders whose aspirations for success have been thwarted by our assessment traditions.

WHERE WE STAND

Systems of educational testing in U.S. schools are in crisis. Our newest federal school improvement legislation, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), acknowledges as much by inviting state and local educational agencies to explore alternate, innovative uses of assessment. This amounts to a confession that federally mandated assessment practices intended to improve schools are not doing the job. They are compromising student learning and damaging the social institution we call “school.” An assessment crisis that has been simmering for decades is finally boiling over, and the time has come to take overdue and assertive action to improve both specific testing practices and our entire assessment culture.

Just to be clear, the focus of my concern goes far deeper than our national and statewide standardized testing practices, although these certainly are in desperate need of deep rethinking and improvement. However, even more troubling problems plague our local district, school, and classroom assessment systems and practices. Consider the big picture:

- There is a national “opt out” movement led by parents to withdraw their children from high-stakes testing programs because they see no educational value in these tests. These parents fear (and some report) that the emphasis on high-stakes testing is emotionally damaging to their children.

- Parents have filed lawsuits in response to local school administrators' efforts to punish students who opt out of end-of-year testing by requiring that they repeat the grade regardless of their level of achievement.
- Students who see little instructional relevance in the high-stakes tests they are required to take are protesting with signs that read "Hands up, don't test" and are refusing to take the tests.
- Issues related to matters of equity are being raised by minority parents and their allies. Some favor annual test-score reporting in order to maintain a spotlight on unequal opportunities for minority children, while others worry about test bias and tests that are insensitive to non-majority cultures.
- Professional educators are losing their jobs and even being sentenced to years in prison for cheating on standardized tests. They claim that their supervisors made them do it.
- States continue to withdraw from multistate assessment consortiums of standardized test development. They are searching for better alternatives.
- Educational policy leaders, such as Achieve and the Council of Chief State School Officers, offer states guidelines for conducting audits of local assessment systems that focus almost exclusively on standardized accountability testing and provide little advice for monitoring the quality of classroom-level assessment, even though the classroom is where the vast majority of assessment takes place.
- Newly minted national standards of test quality developed jointly and promulgated by the American Educational Research Association, the American Psychological Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education (2014) address matters of sound standardized testing and bypass specifics of sound classroom assessment.

These circumstances may have risen, at least in part, from the following troubling realities:

- While ESSA offers assessment flexibility, that flex is in state accountability testing programs, perpetuating the poorly informed, decades-long

federal belief that the best way to use testing to improve schools is to hold schools accountable for raising annual test scores.

- As a result of this kind of federal leadership, an entire generation of school leaders and policymakers have come to see assessment primarily as an accountability tool instead of a powerful means of supporting student learning.
- Most teachers—novices and veterans alike—have not been given the opportunity to understand or to learn to apply basic principles of sound classroom assessment.
- Preparation programs for school administrators remain devoid of relevant, helpful assessment training, leaving teachers with no one to turn to for help if they need or want it.
- Consequently, even though ESSA offers states and local school districts the opportunity to remake their assessment systems in new and productive ways, those who would lead the development and implementation of such potentially exciting systems often lack the assessment literacy needed to do so effectively.
- Naïve federal, state, and local policymakers reveal a profound lack of assessment literacy by setting policies requiring that changes in annual standardized test scores be used to evaluate the performance of teachers and their supervisors despite the fact that this amounts to an indefensible application of those scores for a wide variety of technical and practical reasons (Stiggins, 2014b).
- Since 2010, the United States has spent hundreds of millions of dollars developing new multistate standardized tests whose scores are of little direct instructional value. Local teachers, school leaders, and even assessment personnel are struggling to figure out what to do with all these very expensive results (Oregon Department of Education, 2016).
- Test publishers have been bypassing professional educators altogether and selling their products directly to untrained legislators, turning testing into an increasingly political and financial enterprise versus a tool for teaching and learning.

How can something so critical to the success of our schooling process be going so terribly wrong? The simplest answer is that there is a profound lack of understanding of the basic principles of sound assessment practice throughout the fabric of American educational policy and practice. *Assessment is the process of gathering evidence of student learning to inform educational decisions.* Student success hinges on the quality of those decisions, and the quality of those decisions depends on the quality of the evidence (assessment results) upon which they are based. U.S. students are at risk because our national, state, local district, school, and classroom assessment systems very often do *not* yield the kinds of evidence required for sound instructional decision making where it really matters: in the classroom. Typically, these systems provide only gross indicators of student achievement that cannot inform the classroom-level instructional decisions that truly drive school quality. This has been the case for decades. And yet, over the decades, practitioners and school communities have witnessed layer upon layer of new testing, from local to state to national to international levels. It has come at immense cost, and we have little by way of enhanced student learning to show for it. As a result, the culture surrounding assessment both within and around schools has become increasingly and profoundly toxic and destructive.

WHAT WE MUST DO

Based on my 44 years of experience in the measurement field, and in the face of this intensifying upheaval, I have become convinced that our current systems of educational assessment are so flawed at so many levels that they cannot be saved. Unless we act assertively right now to establish the instructional utility and relevance of assessment, we will continue to waste enormous amounts of resources, and the harm done to students and teachers will reach truly perilous levels.

Yet even in the face of this turmoil, we need not and indeed cannot be discouraged. I believe we have not yet begun to explore assessment's true potential to enhance school quality and student well-being. The future of assessment as a teaching and learning tool can be very bright under the right

conditions. This book details those conditions. They are not currently in place in our schools and have not been for a very long time. But they can be. In the presentation that follows, I will chart a course to a new vision of excellence in assessment that promises much higher levels of student learning success at a fraction of our current testing costs.

Be advised, however, that this success will hinge on our willingness to rethink our practices and make critically important investments at two levels of our assessment infrastructure:

1. We will need to rethink why we assess, what we assess, how we assess it, and what we do with the results. We must fundamentally reconsider the specific strategies and tactics that define assessment in our schools.

2. We will need to address the assessment culture—the social and educational environment—within which we will carry out these reconsidered assessment strategies and tactics. In other words, we must assess well within the context of our societal and educational aspirations, values, and beliefs so as to promote a universal opportunity for learner success, regardless of the learner's social or economic background.

Just imagine what might happen if we broke the old molds of large-scale accountability testing, college admissions testing, and even classroom testing for grading purposes and redeveloped them from the ground up to be the very best they can be at promoting student learning. What might we create for the sake of school quality and student success if we built an entirely new assessment culture for American schools? What positive and productive systems would we create to satisfy the information needs of *all* instructional decision makers? What if we reversed our priorities and used assessment to support teaching and learning first and foremost while still managing to satisfy our accountability needs? What if these systems didn't just identify educational problems but also helped solve them? Bottom line: If we were unconstrained by our historic testing legacy, what kind of system might we create, and how would it fit within our schooling processes?

WHAT WILL A TRULY PRODUCTIVE ASSESSMENT SYSTEM LOOK LIKE?

The assessment system I advocate is relatively easy to describe. But its apparent simplicity should not lead us to underestimate its power to enhance not only *student learning* but also *student well-being*. As you will see, putting in place the conditions necessary to use assessment in *all* of its potentially powerful ways will require considerable investment in our teachers, school leaders, policymakers, and parent communities.

To begin with, a truly productive system will arise from a new culture in which there will never be confusion about our assessment purposes. In every context, we will know why we are assessing student achievement: either to (a) support student learning or (b) judge and report the sufficiency of that learning. Assessors at all levels and in all contexts will declare the instructional decision makers they intend to inform before they begin the assessment process. They will proceed with their assessment only when they know with certainty who will use the results to inform what decisions and, therefore, what information their assessment must be designed and built to provide. Our assessment systems across all levels of use, from the classroom to the boardroom, *will serve all instructional decision makers*, not just once a year but throughout instruction—*before, during, and after the learning*. To repeat for emphasis, regardless of the context, the specific purpose of each assessment will always be clear for and endorsed by all involved.

In the assessment future I am envisioning, we will make absolutely certain that *all of our valued learning targets are clear and appropriate* for the intended learners. This is as essential a foundation for sound assessment as it is for good teaching and learning! The traditional practice of creating tests that thinly sample broad domains of achievement standards will be replaced by assessments that tell us how each student is doing in mastering each priority achievement standard. This will be a completely standards-referenced assessment system informing us on all occasions and in all contexts what comes next in every student's learning. We will agree once and for all on the learning targets that we hold as important for our children and on how

to assess these in instructionally relevant ways. Some achievement standards will be endorsed as important across an entire state, others by local districts, and still others by individual teachers. And, regardless of their complexity, all standards will be assessed accurately by selecting from the full range of available assessment methods.

In other words, *all assessments—whether classroom assessments, interim benchmark tests, or annual tests—will meet standards of quality* so as to yield dependable evidence to inform sound and productive instructional decision making. As a result, teachers, school leaders, parents, and students themselves will have confidence in both the utility and the benefit of assessment in all contexts.

We will lay the foundation of this system by making sure everyone involved, educator and policymaker alike, is *sufficiently assessment literate* to understand what it means to use assessment to protect and promote the well-being of students. Those who assess will know what assessment method to use when, and how to use it to yield dependable results and to help all students believe success is within reach if they keep striving. Schools and the communities they belong to will collaborate to discover and minimize the sources of bias and cultural insensitivity that can distort assessment results.

We will build our new system around *principles of effective communication of assessment results*, ensuring that those who receive the results will understand them completely and be able to use them as the catalyst for productive action. We will end a long history of sending periodic test scores or report card grades to people who have no idea what they mean, how to interpret them, or how to act on them appropriately. Practitioners will be sufficiently assessment literate to understand that feedback to students intended to promote learning differs from feedback that merely reports the sufficiency of that learning with a grade or score. We will make sure assessors convey only truly useful information that fits the instructional context.

And finally, we will *link our assessment practices to student motivation* in constructive ways that keep *all* students believing success is within reach if they keep striving for it. This means we will re-evaluate traditional reward- and punishment-driven “motivational practices” that have the effect of