

Introduction

Thomas R. Guskey

The use of assessments to guide improvements in teaching and learning has a long and rich history in education. In fact, the value of “formative” assessments was identified nearly four decades ago by true giants in the field of education. In their 1971 book *Handbook on Formative and Summative Evaluation of Student Learning*, Benjamin Bloom, Thomas Hastings, and George Madaus described the benefits of offering students regular feedback on their learning progress through classroom formative assessments. Bloom went on to outline specific strategies teachers could use to implement formative assessments as part of regular classroom routines, both to improve student learning and to reduce gaps in the achievement of different subgroups of students (Bloom, 1971). It was Bloom who initiated the phrase *formative assessments* and who provided practical guidance for their use in modern classrooms (Guskey, 2006, 2007).

Although it has taken a while, education leaders at all levels today are coming to recognize the importance of assessment results in efforts to enhance student learning. They understand that assessments *for* learning can help guide improvements in teaching quality and spur advances in a variety of student outcomes (Stiggins, 2008). Many have been impressed by the work of Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (1998), who verified what Bloom and his colleagues told us decades ago: regular formative assessments paired with well-planned corrective activities offer one of the most powerful tools teachers can use to help all students learn well (Bloom, Madaus, & Hastings, 1981; Guskey, 2008).

This book is designed to offer education leaders, especially school principals, practical ideas on how to initiate, lead, and sustain such improvement efforts. But unlike other books whose authors base their ideas on opinions or conjectures, the authors of each of these chapters derived their ideas through hard-earned experience. Their perspectives have been shaped by the successes and failures they

Promote Team-Made Common Formative Assessments

Principals increase the effectiveness of assessments when they promote team-made common formative assessments. Common assessments guide the work of collaborative teams as they use assessment results to improve their individual and collective results. A common assessment holds all students (and teachers) to a common standard, which is set and agreed upon before instruction begins (Fisher, Lapp, & Flood, 2005). Then the team compares results of the assessments to identify students who may need more time and support to meet the standard, to determine strengths and weaknesses of individual teachers or programs, and to revise instruction and/or assessment. Common team-made formative assessments make teachers mutually accountable to each other. These assessments result in collective responsibility for individual student learning for all students within the team and ensure high levels of learning for all students because teachers agree on a mutual proficiency standard (Huff, 2007).

During my first year as principal at Santaquin, teacher teams started by developing or selecting five team-made common formative assessments. At my previous school, Westside Elementary, teachers started with five common assessments and then moved to common assessments for every essential learning concept. Each teacher on the team gives the assessments within the same week. The results are then brought to the weekly team collaboration meeting for analysis; teams plan how to provide nonproficient students more time and support to meet the standard.

Promote Confirmed Instructional Practices

When there is an unwavering focus on student learning, the effectiveness of any specific teaching strategy is judged in terms of assessment results. A particular instructional strategy is successful if it results in measurable student learning. Confirmed practice is that which produces results. Principals can guide teachers in examining their assessment results to determine the effectiveness of their instruction. I guided teachers at Santaquin Elementary by frequently attending weekly team collaboration meetings and participating in data discussions. I encouraged teachers to share instructional strategies that resulted in high levels of student learning. Precise academic standards, a common curriculum, team-made common formative assessments, and confirmed instructional practices are all tightly linked

A Principal's Guide to Assessment

Chris Jakicic

All educators are facing tough scrutiny about student achievement issues in this era of high-stakes testing. Principals often wish that someone would hand us a guidebook explaining how we can truly ensure that all of our students will learn. In the absence of such a guidebook, we must look at the research about what successful schools have done to improve their achievement levels and decide how we can apply these practices to our own schools. With this in mind, it would be hard to ignore the compelling research about the benefits of using assessments to guide our instructional practices as we work to help all students learn at high levels.

One of the most cited pieces of research about the effects of assessment is summarized in Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam's article "Inside the Black Box" (1998). The authors examined over 250 international research studies about schools successfully improving student learning and concluded that schools could expect a .4 to a .7 standard deviation increase in student achievement if teachers implement formative assessments in classrooms. This level of improvement is significant enough for any principal to want to duplicate those results.

This chapter explores what principals need to know to support teachers as they create and use an effective assessment system that includes formative assessment. I will also consider problems that might emerge as teachers use new assessment practices and suggest solutions.

What Is a Balanced Assessment System?

One of the first considerations when evaluating the effectiveness of your assessment practices is whether teachers and administrators get the information they need as a result of the assessments currently in use. Teachers want to

Creating Assessment Literacy in the Community

As previously discussed, a focused professional development plan is critical to allow schools and school systems to develop an effective assessment program. However, the assessment cultural shift is dramatic enough that we must consider its effects on not just our internal community, but our external community as well. School board members, parents, and local universities also need “professional development” to become assessment literate. The development of an assessment-literate culture for the twenty-first century within our external community will pave the path for implementation of large-scale assessments that are diagnostic rather than comparative. It will allow schools and districts to openly discuss the controversial topic of grading as a method to evaluate the evidence produced through effective assessment strategies. Therefore, classroom practice may shift toward the use of standards-based grading instead of traditional report cards. These changes alone will start the journey toward a renewed assessment policy but will require the understanding and knowledge of our external communities for sustained implementation.

Creating sustainable assessment practice within our internal community requires partnerships with education programs in our postsecondary institutions. Bridging the gap between K–12 systems and teacher preparation programs is critical to strengthen our collective understanding of effective assessment strategies as opposed to a traditional testing practice. If these topics are not addressed at the university level, professional development will be stuck on a continuous cycle of teaching and reteaching practicing educators.

Establishing an assessment-literate culture within our entire school community provides the support for teachers to create a balanced assessment program, utilize standards-based report cards, plan next steps for instruction, provide detailed and descriptive feedback to students, and correctly identify what students know and don't know and their levels of achievement. More importantly, an assessment-literate community encourages students to take ownership of their own learning. Students will become more engaged as they recognize that assessment moves beyond the test and assessments are far more than a grade or proficiency measure. Parents and students will experience how assessment reinforces the nonnegotiables of learning instead of serving solely as a source of comparing, sorting, and reporting.

Facilitating Training Modules With Teachers

The teacher training modules described in the following seven sections cover some of the relevant topics and processes essential to a balanced assessment system that have been discussed earlier in this chapter. Those leading these modules should be well versed in technical assessment design. You might want to have an outside expert begin the modules, allowing you as a building or district leader to follow up with your own staff afterward, depending on your own and your staff's assessment knowledge and abilities, and your comfort in proceeding alone without an outside expert. Ensure that the facilitator knows the learning outcomes expected for each module. The number of attendees can vary, as long as there are groups of teachers with available work time. The principal *and* staff should attend the trainings to build a culture of collective assessment literacy.

The timeline for implementing the modules is dependent upon the assessment literacy and application levels of your staff. One way to begin facilitating these training modules is to conduct an assessment-literacy needs assessment to determine whether staff understand the types and purposes of assessment. Consider posing some assessment-related statements and asking teachers to rate their confidence about each item on a Likert scale such as the following:

1. I know the difference between large-scale, mid-cycle, and short-cycle assessments, and I could give examples of each.
2. I understand the difference between achievement and aptitude, and I can explain the purposes and appropriate uses of assessing each to a noneducator.
3. I can clearly articulate differences between summative and formative assessment. Some sample definitions and examples of differences include:
4. I have a strong sense of data analysis and can make sense of assessment information for instructional implications.

Using a scale allows teachers to self-select their understanding and application of assessment concepts. An open-ended portion after each question that asks for rationale and examples might better reveal common understandings and misunderstandings. These can then be specifically addressed in the formal modules.