

SOLVING THE ASSESSMENT PUZZLE

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WHY ASSESS?

IF WE ASSESS IT, EVERYONE BELIEVES IT'S IMPORTANT!

Tracey, a Year 5 teacher, was feeling particularly discouraged after spending her whole weekend marking papers and creating a unit test to give to her students during the upcoming week. "Why do I bother to assess my students anyway?" she thought. "Isn't it enough just to teach them without having to mark all those papers, give test after test, create rubrics for projects and then somehow count up all those points at report card time? I'd like to take this grade book and throw it away! Assessment is just a lot of unnecessary paperwork."

TEN BASIC PURPOSES OF ASSESSMENT

1. **Selecting, clarifying and evaluating educational objectives and outcomes**

Objectives frequently become much clearer when educators deal with assessment issues. When we use assessment data well, we take a comprehensive look at student outcomes and then match our teaching objectives to the students' needs. We may ask ourselves, "What is really important for students to know and to be able to do? What are the essentials?" Our objectives must also be clearly stated to the students. This is best done before instruction begins. When we look at what we will assess, we know where our focus and emphasis should be.

2. **Planning instruction**

When used correctly, assessment can be a wonderful instructional tool. It can help us find out what our students already know. We can then use this information and plan instruction based on it. This involves pre-testing, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and knowing when remediation or acceleration is needed and for what they are needed. Using assessment in this way can make our teaching more efficient and effective.

Assessment gives us the information we need to implement ongoing differentiated instruction. It allows us to evaluate student progress and plan instruction accordingly. By assessing our students' readiness levels and learning profiles, we can better plan a wider range of classroom activities and educational experiences to meet all of their needs.

3. **Evaluating student work**

One of the most obvious purposes of assessment is that it gives us a way to evaluate students and make judgements about their work on a regular basis. Teachers struggle to find ways to do this fairly and accurately. Establishing specific standards-based criteria for evaluation is a critical first step. From this criteria we can determine more concrete assessment tools such as points, scores, percentages or letter grades. Student work, especially projects and performances, may also be evaluated using rubrics, checklists, observation logs, etc.

4. Reporting and comparing student progress

Parents want to know how well their child is doing. Most are interested in knowing their child's position relative to educational standards. They may also want to know how their child compares to others in the school, region, state or country. School boards, administrators and the media often want to use student assessment to compare student progress between one year and another or between one school and another. Therefore, it is important that we find ways to inform students, their parents and others about student progress.

For individual students, the most efficient way to communicate this information is through grades on a progress report or report card. Report card grades, however, are more than just interesting information! They determine grade point averages and class rankings that are unbelievably significant to many students and their parents. Even with standards-based report cards, we need to remember that grades are just one indicator of student progress.

For a more generalised look at student progress, we use various types of standardised test scores. They provide views of students' positions as they relate to state and federal educational standards. From these scores, comparisons can be made from year to year, from student to student or from school to school.

Other assessment methods may provide different perspectives about student progress. Student-led conferences, parent-teacher conferences, portfolios of student work that demonstrate progress over time, weekly or monthly progress reports, videos of student performances, student journals and learning logs are examples. Assessing students in all of these ways can help us ascertain a student's standing and lead us to the next step by showing what that student can do to improve or to maintain progress.

5. Counselling

Students constantly need guidance in the academic realm as well as in their personal growth and affective skills. Some have severe social or emotional problems while others may struggle academically. Assessment instruments give us a way to identify which students are contending with emotional or psychological problems and can help us determine the best ways to help these students. Psychological tests, vocational preference tests, checklists assessing strengths and weaknesses, and student questionnaires are some of the instruments we can use to help us deal with these problems and counsel students effectively.

Student self-assessment is an excellent counselling tool. It helps students assess their own strengths and weaknesses in the context of academics, career planning and personal growth. Students who are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses learn to make adjustments and choices that are beneficial for their development throughout their lives.

6. Motivating and encouraging students

Assessments provide motivation and encouragement for many students. Procrastinators need due dates and an assurance their work will be examined and assessed by the teacher. If work was never assessed, and everyone was guaranteed to receive the same grade no matter what work they had done, many students would stop working as hard as they do, and some would stop working altogether!

Without some type of assessment, most students would think, "Why bother?" Others would become very resentful because they were working so much harder than others yet did not get any particular credit or recognition for doing so. Perhaps it is human nature to be motivated by getting rewards for hard work. Assessment serves this purpose for many students.

Assessment also serves as a motivator when students can see their progress and accomplishments. For a student who is discouraged and feels unmotivated, looking at past performance and seeing how much improvement has been made can be a great encourager. Assessment makes this progress more readily observable, quantifiable and obvious.

Finally, assessment helps us predict future performance. Students are often motivated by goals for the future, and various types of assessments help point the way to future possibilities. This can be a tremendous inspiration to some students.

7. Giving special recognition to students

Assessments give us data to use when choosing students to recognise for outstanding accomplishments. Selecting students for special honours includes assessing them in a number of different ways based on established criteria. This assures that the selection process is fair and unbiased.

Special recognition is often given to students for outstanding products or performances. Science fair winners, first chair in the orchestra and first place in a writing contest are all chosen through various types of project or performance assessments. Gathering assessment data helps us be fair evaluators so that appropriate recognition can be given.

8. Selecting students for special programs or instruction

In general, the criteria for entry into special programs are set by regional, state or federal regulations. The data from various assessment instruments helps us see which students meet the criteria so they can be placed in appropriate learning environments. Identification procedures for gifted or special education students generally require that students be assessed in specific ways. This is significant because accurately assessing and selecting students for special programs allows them to interact with others that are functioning on the same ability level as well as receive targeted and appropriate instruction.

9. Evaluating program effectiveness

Assessment can be used to improve a program or to judge its worth and effectiveness. It is a good way to make sure a program is meeting student needs and its stated goals and objectives. Assessments often give validity to programs by documenting innovative teaching strategies and techniques, student growth, parental involvement, changes in student attitudes, etc.

Peer review is sometimes a feature of this type of evaluation. Programs are evaluated by teachers from another region in the same state. Teachers are evaluated by their peers based on standards developed by teachers and regional administration. When done well, this type of review and evaluation helps us make positive changes and encourages us to keep doing the things that are working well.

10. Holding schools accountable

"How good a job are you doing?" is the central question of accountability, but this is often fraught with confusion and misunderstandings. Accountability includes standards, standardised test scores, performance indicators such as dropout rates, school attendance, and rewards and sanctions. Test scores, student outcomes and the other factors mentioned above are valuable information but are not automatic verdicts of good or poor teaching. Should teachers be held accountable for their students' performance or only for providing good teaching?

Teachers, principals and regional administrators are under more pressure than ever before to show results that will prove to the public that they are effective. Newspapers and Internet sites regularly show test scores broken down by school and by subject. When states set an arbitrary standard, there is no modification for factors such as high poverty, English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) learners or student mobility. This makes accountability more difficult for teachers who work in disadvantaged schools. This becomes an issue of fairness, especially when teacher pay is tied to test scores.

The current accountability movement sometimes limits teachers' control over curriculum and instruction and at times seems distrustful of teachers' professional ability to assess student performance and growth. However, using assessment data to hold schools accountable can serve many positive purposes. It can help teachers target skills and outcomes. It gives us specific standards and benchmarks to work toward. In any case, assessment data should not be used to punish teachers, administrators or schools who are working as hard as they can, sometimes under extremely difficult circumstances.

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Two light gray puzzle pieces are positioned in the lower right quadrant of the page. One piece is slightly above and to the left of the other, suggesting they are part of a larger set.