Collaborative Common Assessments

Teamwork. Instruction. Results.

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Foreword by Richard DuFour

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Doing Extraordinary Things

Collaboration is a social imperative. Without it, people can’t get extraordinary things done in organizations.

—Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner

Many variations of common assessments abound in schools and teams. Sadly, many of those variations are both instructionally deficient and “collaboration lite,” with little hope of ever helping accomplish anything extraordinary. In other words, the assessment and its ensuing results are viewed as an obtrusive event that generates data but no meaningful information and that is often orchestrated—from beginning to end—with little involvement or ownership on behalf of teachers and their learners, the key stakeholders. In addition, the data are sometimes provided with a prepared digital analysis that may come too late in the learning process to alter outcomes in meaningful ways. By contrast, schools where the work of collaborative common assessments makes the greatest difference house conversations that are instructionally enlightening and teams that are collaboratively dependent.

Collaborative common assessments provide a powerful mode of inquiry-based professional development that seeks to improve student achievement and professional practice. For teams to develop the shared knowledge and skills of assessment literacy and instructional agility, they must work together to ask the right questions, explore their own results, and create solutions to complex challenges. If the process is to make a significant difference, teaching teams—and their learners—must remain integral to the design and delivery of the assessment as well as the interpretation of and subsequent responses to the results.
Collaborative Common Assessments Defined

Many experts’ definitions of common assessment address the same basic ideas: they are given in the same time frame by a team of teachers who share the same students or standards and the results of those assessments are used to make instructional decisions; hence, there is general agreement that common formative assessments work best as they allow for making adjustments to support continued learning (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006; Bailey & Jakicic, 2012; Reeves, 2005, 2006). Much of the writing about common assessments aligns with the work of the Professional Learning Community at Work™ architects Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, and Robert Eaker (2008), who have made it their mission to impact student learning in positive ways, from providing direct instruction for individual learners with specific needs to monitoring for program improvements that must be made at the team and sometimes the school level. Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Thomas Many (2006) define common assessments to be:

an assessment typically created collaboratively by a team of teachers responsible for the same grade level or course. Common formative assessments are frequently administered throughout the year to identify (1) individual students who need additional time and support for learning, (2) the teaching strategies most effective in helping students acquire the intended knowledge and skills, (3) program concerns—areas in which students generally are having difficulty achieving the intended standard, and (4) improvement goals for individual teachers and the team. (p. 214)

While teams frequently employ common formative assessments to recognize both students needing support and effective teaching strategies, program concerns and improvement goals are just as important to address.

Education experts concur on what common assessments are, who is involved, and what must be done with the findings (Ainsworth & Viegut, 2006; Bailey & Jakicic, 2012; DuFour et al., 2008; Reeves, 2005, 2006). Heavy emphasis is placed on formative common assessments. The guiding premise that all learners can learn and will be successful naturally dictates that opportunities to learn are never done. However, there is a point at which common summative assessments are necessary to certify mastery for students, especially when priority standards have been identified for that very purpose: to ensure mastery for all learners in the agreed-upon essential areas. In addition, common assessments must be designed, delivered, and analyzed in the context of a larger, balanced assessment system. They must be truly collaborative in nature—from start to finish, from teachers to learners.
While the premise behind common assessments begs for collaboration, the practice of common assessments in the field has created variations of collaboration. Therefore, it is important to start clarifying the work of common assessments with the addition of collaboration in the title. A collaborative common assessment is any assessment, formative or summative, that is either team created or team endorsed in advance of instruction and then administered in close proximity by all instructors so they can collaboratively examine the results, plan instructionally agile responses, analyze errors, and explore areas for program improvement. Collaborative common assessments require teachers’ involvement in the entire process from accurate design to effective use of classroom assessment information.

Collaborative common assessments entail a process far more committed to teamwork, instruction, and results than the simplistic, popular notion of providing teams with benchmark assessments and then engaging them in looking at the results together. Collaborative common assessments put educators in the driver’s seat and provide teachers with the necessary opportunity to assess according to their learners’ needs. The process needs to remain as close to the classroom reality for teachers and their learners as possible.

**The Collaborative Common Assessment Process**

Common assessments do not require lockstep teaching. Effective assessment practices should never involve rigid adherence to pacing guides, the unthinking application of predeveloped curriculum and assessments, or a blanket approach to instruction. Rather, the work requires an ongoing commitment by teams to create, plan, monitor, diagnose, and respond appropriately throughout the entire process. Beginning at the star, figure 1.1 (page 8) outlines the process teams use when employing the work of collaborative common assessments. In figure 1.1, circles of arrows are used to show the iterative process, direction, and connections in and among the key components. Any shape with parallel sides (rectangle or diamond) highlights the places where teams must function with the degree of parallelism, making team agreements that they adhere to with fidelity from classroom to classroom. This means there will be meetings throughout the process to create plans, check in on progress, respond to findings, and adjust with new plans as needed. The two triangles illustrate the parts of the process in which teachers are providing instruction in their individual classrooms. The triangle—also recognized as the delta, a universal symbol for dynamic change—is used to acknowledge and emphasize the reality that what happens in individual classrooms is unique and ever-changing.
The collaborative common assessment process includes four critical phases: (1) preparation, (2) design, (3) delivery, and (4) data. Teams must engage in collaborative conversations that involve critical thinking, problem solving, and creative design during each phase. No phase is more important than another phase, and the success of the team in each phase will be contingent upon the quality of the work and the team members’ relentless adherence to the commitments they made to abide by that work in each of the previous phases. Ready-made tools or resources can provide launching pads for planning and discussion purposes in each of the phases, but those tools or resources can seldom be used wholesale, unless the team reviews them and verifies in advance that the tools will align with standards and support team decision making throughout the process.

**The Preparation Phase**

Working together as a team may be the first challenge in creating, reviewing, and adjusting common assessments collaboratively, but a few critical steps in this phase help educators begin the process with a strong foundation of teamwork as shown in figure 1.2.
In the preparation phase, teams will first establish norms. With these protocols in place to guide their work together, teams then begin to chart the course of the assessments they plan to develop. Collaboratively, teams prioritize and unpack standards, explore available data, establish SMART goals, and then create a map of the learning targets and assessments they need to deliver to address the findings and decisions they have made along the way. From here, teams are ready to begin the work of designing the assessments themselves.

**The Design Phase**

Collaborative common assessments have the greatest impact on student learning and the best opportunity to support teams in managing their work when the summative assessment is designed before the instruction begins. Figure 1.3 illustrates the components that teams address during the design phase.

The design phase begins with identifying the targets of the assessments. As a first step, teams identify the learning targets found in their course or grade-level standards. Identifying and understanding the learning targets is imperative to a team’s ability to create an accurate
assessment. The targets will dictate the method of assessment required. In selecting and unpacking the standard, the team members have agreed that the standard is so important that their learners will need to master it; therefore, the team will need a common summative assessment to collectively certify that all of the learners have been successful.

Once the standards have been unpacked and the targets are clear, teams proceed to design formative and summative assessments and determine which will be common. In this step, teams begin to map out an assessment plan that serves as a guide to help them make strategic decisions. Every unit of instruction should include a balanced assessment system, meaning there will be one or more summative assessments along with some formative assessments to help frame the pathway to success for learners and their teachers. Not all assessments on an assessment map will be common.

Once a pathway has been delineated, teams need to make decisions about the timing and frequency of their common assessments. Teams who use common formative assessments throughout units of instruction typically find learners require fewer opportunities to re-engage in the learning after the summative assessment because they monitored learners’ success all along. So, teams will want to identify a few common formative assessments in their unit of instruction.

The most important part of this step involves actually writing the summative assessment. It is critical that the entire team participates in its development and all individuals clearly understand the expectations for the summative assessment in advance of launching their classroom instruction. All teachers must understand the targets and what quality will look like through the summative assessment in order to be successful in any of the following aspects.

- They are certain the assessment accurately measures the standards and targets.
- They are confident they will generate quality evidence to certify mastery for their learners.
- They are clear regarding their formative pathway to success.
- They can deliver laser-like instruction to support learning regarding the standards.
- They will be able to interpret their results with consistency and accuracy.

Once the summative assessment is created, teams can be very focused and specific in their development and use of formative assessments. Without the summative assessments in place, however, common formative assessments become loose pebbles on a pathway that leads nowhere.