

Table of Contents

About the Editor	vi
Introduction From the Bell Curve to the Mountain: A New Vision for Achievement, Assessment, and Equity <i>Douglas Reeves</i>	1
SECTION 1 Classroom Assessment	
<hr/>	
Chapter 1 Using Assessments to Improve Teaching <i>and Learning</i> <i>Thomas R. Guskey</i>	13
Chapter 2 Involving Students in the Classroom Assessment Process <i>Anne Davies</i>	27
Chapter 3 <i>Assessment for Learning: An Essential</i> Foundation of Productive Instruction <i>Rick Stiggins</i>	47
SECTION 2 System-Level Assessment	
<hr/>	
Chapter 4 Common Formative Assessments: The Centerpiece of an Integrated Standards-Based Assessment System <i>Larry Ainsworth</i>	61
Chapter 5 Designing a Comprehensive Approach to Classroom Assessment <i>Robert J. Marzano</i>	79

Chapter 6	The Last Frontier: Tackling the Grading Dilemma <i>Ken O'Connor</i>	101
SECTION 3	Assessment Challenges	
<hr/>		
Chapter 7	The Journey Toward Effective Assessment for English Language Learners <i>Lisa Almeida</i>	119
Chapter 8	Crossing the Canyon: Helping Students With Special Needs Achieve Proficiency <i>Linda A. Gregg</i>	133
SECTION 4	Assessment Leadership	
<hr/>		
Chapter 9	Content <i>Then</i> Process: Teacher Learning Communities in the Service of Formative Assessment <i>Dylan Wiliam</i>	149
Chapter 10	Data on Purpose: Due Diligence to Increase Student Achievement <i>Stephen White</i>	167
Chapter 11	Challenges and Choices: The Role of Educational Leaders in Effective Assessment <i>Douglas Reeves</i>	183
<hr/>		
Epilogue	Once Upon a Time: A Tale of Excellence in Assessment <i>Richard DuFour</i>	203

Introduction

From the Bell Curve to the Mountain: A New Vision for Achievement, Assessment, and Equity

Douglas Reeves

As educators, school leaders, and policymakers, we exist in a world where too often assessment equals high-stakes tests. This is a very limited view of assessment. The chapters in this book present a broader view. But *Ahead of the Curve* is neither a diatribe against tests nor a wistful call for the return to the mythical test-free days that never were. Rather, the contributors to this volume call for a redirection of assessment to its fundamental purpose: the improvement of student achievement, teaching practice, and leadership decision-making. The stakes could not be higher. We have two alternatives before us: Either we heed the clarion call of Schmoker (2006) that there is an unprecedented opportunity for achieving results now, or we succumb to the complaints of those who claim that schools, educators, and leaders are impotent compared to the magnitude of the challenge before them.

These challenges are both external and internal. While the external challenges—poverty, housing, nutrition, and pervasive inequities of opportunity—are apparent and well-recognized, educators and school leaders must be equally candid when addressing internal challenges, including long-held traditions that elevate personal preference over evidence. The chapters that follow presume a culture in which the most important criterion for educational decision-making is the evidence. We embrace explicitly the proposition that effective practice and popular practice are very likely two different things.

Give Students Second Chances to Demonstrate Success

To become an integral part of the instructional process, assessments cannot be a one-shot, “do-or-die” experience for students. Instead, assessments must be part of an ongoing effort to help students learn. If teachers follow assessments with high-quality corrective instruction, then students should have a second chance to demonstrate their new level of competence and understanding. This second chance determines the effectiveness of the corrective process while also giving students another opportunity to experience success in learning, thus providing them with additional motivation.

Writing teachers have long recognized the many benefits of a second chance. They know that students rarely write well in their initial attempt. So these teachers build into the writing process several opportunities for students to gain feedback on early drafts and then to use that feedback to revise and improve their writing. Teachers of other subjects frequently balk at the idea—mostly because it differs from their personal learning experiences.

Some teachers express concern about the fairness of giving students a second chance and point out that, “Life isn’t like that.” They describe how a surgeon does not get a second chance to perform an operation successfully and a pilot does not get a second chance to land a jumbo jet safely. Because of the very high stakes involved, each must get it right the first time.

But how did these highly skilled professionals learn their craft? The first operation performed by that surgeon was on a cadaver, which clearly allows a lot of latitude for mistakes. Similarly, the pilot spent many hours in a flight simulator before ever attempting a landing from the cockpit. Such experiences allowed these professionals to learn from their mistakes and improve their performance. Similar instructional techniques are used in nearly every professional endeavor. Only in schools do students face the prospect of one-shot, do-or-die assessments, with no chance to demonstrate what they learned from previous mistakes.

All educators strive to help their students become lifelong learners, and to develop learning-to-learn skills. What better learning-to-learn skill is there than learning from one’s mistakes? Mistakes should not mark the end of learning; rather, they can be the beginning. Some assessment experts argue, in fact, that students learn nothing from a successful performance. Instead, they learn when their performance is less than successful, for then they can gain direction about how to improve (Wiggins, 1998).

Data Teams

These teams serve a specific function: to analyze common formative assessment data that can be used to target and implement instructional strategies aimed at improving student performance between the pre- and post-assessments. The data team process (from The Leadership and Learning Center, formerly the Center for Performance Assessment) includes five main steps:

1. Collect and chart the student performance data.
2. Analyze strengths and obstacles.
3. Set a short-term goal for student improvement.
4. Select effective instructional strategies (both experience-based and research-based) to meet that goal.
5. Determine results indicators to gauge the effectiveness of the selected teaching strategies.

Grade-level or department data teams (including special educators and special-area educators) plan how to deliver interventions and accelerated learning to meet the diverse needs of their students as they work through each of the five data team steps. They write an action plan to guide the implementation of their data-driven steps, and then they meet formally and informally between the pre- and post-assessments to monitor and adjust their instruction as needed.

The feature box below (and continued on page 90) shows an example using the five data team steps.

The Data Team Process				
Step 1: Collect and Chart Data Results				
Grade 5 Math Teachers	Number of Students	Number Proficient and Higher	Number Below Proficient	Percent Proficient and Higher
Betty	25	3	22	12%
Tom	27	5	22	19%
Susan	25	5	20	20%
TOTALS	77	13	64	17%

(continued)

Knowing Our Passengers: The English Language Learners

The needs of English language learners are as diverse as the students themselves, and the challenges extend beyond language acquisition. When a student performs poorly on an assessment, is he or she struggling with language issues, cultural issues, or learning issues? Educators of English language learners face this critical question on a daily basis.

As with English-speaking students, many factors have an enormous impact on English language learners' ability to learn: which language is used (and how) in their homes and neighborhoods, their educational backgrounds, their families' socioeconomic levels, and the number of books in their homes. All of these factors contribute to the students' readiness to learn, as well as to their ability to learn in a new language.

No two English language learners have the same amount of knowledge or competency in their primary language or are in the identical stage of English-language acquisition, which adds to the challenge for educators. Some English language learners were born in the United States but reside in non-English-speaking households. Others are immigrants who have received differing amounts of formal education. Some students have been a part of the American school system for a number of years, but they may still be in the initial stages of English-language acquisition. Communication style—aside from language skills and fluency—can be a hidden issue in classroom assessment. Many cultures do not value the open style of communication that we have in our classrooms. Consequently, some English language learners may choose to be silent or take on a passive role rather than risk making a mistake.

A small percentage of English language learners come from very primitive cultures. These students have limited social and academic experiences. They may have never been in a building with running water or used a pencil. In addition to learning *in* English while also learning the English language, they have much to learn about our educational environment; concepts such as fire drills, lunch lines, and restroom passes are all unfamiliar.

Many parents of English language learners are equally unaware of the expectations and routines of the American school system—let alone the assessment process with its battery of standardized tests. Those who have a limited education themselves often rely solely on schools to educate their children. It is not uncommon for parents to work long hours at more than one job, making participation in school functions difficult or impossible. Parents may also lack confidence in their communication skills and not feel comfortable pursuing a relationship with the school; as a result, students lose a critical support structure.

The results of assessments *for* learning are readily accessible to both the student and teacher so both can make critical decisions about the route to take toward proficiency in content, concepts, and skills. The following are typical informal classroom assessment strategies that can be used on a day-to-day basis in the classroom:

- Writing samples
- Performance assessments
- Task-specific checklists
- Work sample analyses
- Conferences and interviews
- True/false, multiple choice, short answer, fill-in-the blank, and matching exercises
- Skills analyses
- Portfolios
- Computer-based presentations
- Task analyses
- Observations
- Authentic assessments
- Checklists
- Student products
- Publisher assessments

Effective informal classroom assessments should do the following:

- Address the content, concepts, and skills required in the standard.
- Permit assessment on a periodic, ongoing basis.
- Permit tracking and monitoring of progress.
- Allow self-reflection by the student.
- Provide ample opportunities for the student to demonstrate progress.

The gaps in learning for special-needs students can be so wide that incremental improvements may be the best measure of the student's academic progress. According to McLoughlin and Lewis (2005), assessment of students with special needs must be a systematic and *ongoing* process of collecting educationally *relevant* information on student achievement and performance to help make appropriate instructional decisions. To ensure ongoing collection of relevant information, teachers can use the following five-step process for formative classroom assessment:

1. "Unwrap" or "unpack" the standard to determine the concepts, content, and skills required for instruction.
2. Determine the purpose of the assessment.
3. Select specific assessments that will provide the desired information.
4. Gather and discuss the results of the assessment with the student.
5. Use that information to make decisions about instruction.