

ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING:
A VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF
ASSESSMENT POLICY IN THE UNITED STATES*

*A statement of assessment priorities developed by the
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Executive Summary

The assessment of student achievement is a central part of effective schooling. The evolution of assessment in the United States over the past five decades has led to the strongly held view that school improvement requires the articulation of high achievement *standards*, the transformation of those expectations into rigorous *assessments*, and the expectation that educators will be held *accountable* for student achievement as reflected in student test scores. In this context, we rely on assessments *of* learning to inform accountability decisions. They tell us how much students have learned, whether standards are being met, and if educators have done the job they were hired to do.

However, assessment also can contribute to the development of effective schools when used to support the learning process itself. If assessments of learning provide evidence of student achievement at a particular point in time for public reporting, then assessments *for* learning serve to help students learn more. The crucial distinction is between assessment to determine the status of learning and assessment to promote greater learning.

Assessments *of* learning dominate in the United States and have for decades. Their evolution has been as follows: 1960s, district-wide testing (in virtually every district); 1970s, state-wide testing (in virtually every state); 1980s, annual national assessment; 1990s, periodic international assessments. All of these remain in place today. Across the nation, across the various levels and over the decades, we have invested billions of dollars to ensure the accuracy of the scores on these assessments of learning.

But over the decades what has been our investment in the use of assessment to promote greater student achievement—in assessment *for* learning? With a very few exceptions, the answer is almost nothing. Only about a dozen states require competence in assessment to be licensed to teach and virtually none expect administrators to be assessment literate in order to be certified to practice. No certification examination currently in place in the United States verifies competence in assessment. Since training programs are built around certification standards that do not include competence in assessment, these programs have almost completely ignored this facet of teacher preparation over the decades. For these reasons, we remain a national faculty unschooled in the principles of effective assessment for learning.

As a result, we face the danger that student progress is being mismeasured day to day in classrooms across the nation. This means that all of the critically important day to day instructional decisions made by students, teachers and parents may be based on misinformation about student success. The result is the misdiagnosis of student needs, student misunderstanding of their ability to learn, miscommunication to parents and others about student progress, and virtually no “assessment for learning” in classrooms.

In their 1998 research review, Black and Wiliam examined the research literature on assessment worldwide asking if there is evidence that improving the quality and effectiveness of use of classroom assessments raises student achievement as reflected in periodic standardized tests. If there is, they asked, what kinds of improvements in classroom assessment practice are likely to yield the greatest gains in achievement?

They uncovered over 250 research articles that addressed these issues. Upon pooling the information on the estimated effects of improved classroom assessment on

summative test scores, they report unprecedented gains in student achievement. They estimate that we could expect average gains of 15 to 30 percentile points or three years in grade equivalent terms. They report gains, which if applied to the most recent TIMMS international math assessment results would have raised the United States from the rank of 21st out of 41 participating nations to the top five. Further, they point out that “improved formative assessment helps low achievers more than other students and so reduces the range of achievement while raising achievement overall.” (p. 141) Hypothetically, if teachers applied the principles of assessment for learning only in classrooms of low achieving minority students, chronic achievement gaps would be erased.

Therefore, our mission in the integration of assessment into the school improvement process in the United States should be to achieve a far better balance our reliance on assessment for and of learning. Both are essential. One is in place, while the other is almost totally missing. Specifically, it is proposed that:

- Teacher and administrator licensing standards be revised in every state to reflect an expectation of competence in both assessment of and for learning
- Certification examinations and procedures at all levels be revised to provide evidence of competence in assessment of and for learning
- Teacher and administrator training programs be revised to assure that graduates are assessment literate—both in terms of promoting and documenting student learning
- Local school district hiring and job performance standards be revised to reflect concern for classroom assessment literacy
- States and school districts appropriate assessment resources in equal proportions to assure the accuracy and effective use of both assessments of and for learning
- A comprehensive long-term professional development program becomes the highest assessment priority in the United States resulting in the initiation of a nationwide effort to overcome decades of neglect by providing teachers with the opportunity to develop their classroom assessment literacy.

ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING:
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ASSESSMENT POLICY IN THE UNITED STATES*

The assessment of student achievement is a central part of effective schooling. The evolution of assessment in the United States over the past five decades has led to the strongly held view that school improvement requires the:

- Articulation of high achievement *standards*,
- Transformation of those expectations into rigorous *assessments*, and
- Expectation that educators will be held *accountable* for student achievement as reflected in student test scores.

Standards frame accepted or valued definitions of academic success. Over the past decade educators have articulated appropriate achievement standards across grade levels and school subjects. Accountability compels attention to these standards as educators plan and deliver instruction in the classroom. Assessment provides the evidence of student, teacher and system success.

To maximize the energy devoted to school improvement, we have “raised the bar” by setting world class standards for student achievement, as opposed to minimum competencies. Further, policy makers often attach the promise of rewards for schools that produce high scores and sanctions for schools that do not. In this sense, they seek to intensify the accountability thrust.

In this context, we rely on assessments *of* learning to inform accountability decisions. They tell us how much students have learned, whether standards are being met, and if educators have done the job they were hired to do. Interested parents, communities, and politicians demand and deserve evidence of student learning.

However, there is another way in which assessment can contribute to the development of effective schools that has been largely ignored in the evolution of schools in the standards, assessment and accountability scenario described above. We also can use assessments *for* learning. If assessments of learning provide evidence of achievement for public reporting, then assessments for learning serve to help students learn more. The crucial distinction is between assessment to determine the status of learning and assessment to promote greater learning.

One purpose for this vision of assessment priorities is to affirm the value of both assessments *of* and *for* learning. But a more important purpose is to urge a much stronger investment in assessment for learning in the United States. The presentation that follows argues for school improvement by tapping the unprecedented achievement gains that can be realized if we turn the current day-to-day classroom assessment process into a more powerful tool for learning. We know that schools will be held accountable for raising test scores. Now we must provide teachers with the assessment tools needed to do the job. This will require a nationwide investment in training teachers to assess accurately and to provide students with useful feedback. The return will be worth it:

annual scores alone, without the kind of day-in and day-out coaching to standards, cannot improve performance.

A Status Report on Assessments OF Learning

Assessments of learning have been the norm throughout the United States for decades. We began with standardized college admissions testing in the early decades of the previous century and it continues essentially unchanged today. But these tests are not used merely for college selection. For decades, we have ranked states based on average College Board scores. This also is assessment of learning for public accountability. In response to demands for accountability in public schools in the 1960s, we launched district-wide standardized testing programs that also remain in place today. In the 1970s, we began the broad implementation of statewide testing programs and those have spread into every state today. Also in the 1970s and extending into the 1980s, we added a national assessment program which continues. And finally, over the past decade, we have become deeply involved and invested in international assessment programs. Across the nation, across the various levels and over the decades, we have invested billions of dollars to ensure the accuracy of the scores on these assessments of learning. At the time of this writing, federal legislation is pending that would require standardized testing of every pupil in the United States in mathematics and reading every year in grades three through eight, once again revealing our faith in assessment of learning as a school improvement tool.

It is testimony to our societal belief in the power of assessments of learning that we would permit all of the levels of testing to remain in place at the same time and at very high costs. Clearly, over the decades, we have believed that by checking achievement status and reporting the results to the public we can:

- Apply the pressure needed to intensify and thus speed school improvement, and
- Provide policy makers and practicing educators with test results that can inform the critically important school improvement decisions that are made at district, state and federal levels.

However, assessments of learning are not limited to large-scale testing programs. Teachers also conduct similar “summative” assessments of learning at the end of instruction to determine what students have learned. If these feed into the assignment of report card grades, then they serve the same “audit” after the fact purposes as do state assessments. Of course, teachers do this extensively, adding to the dominance of this purpose for assessing in schools.

A Status Report on Assessment FOR Learning

Over the decades what has been our investment in the use of assessment to promote greater student achievement? The answer to this question provides a much different portrait of assessment in our schools.

First, a Description of Assessment for Learning

In this case, teachers use the classroom assessment process and the continuous flow of information about student achievement that it provides to advance, not merely check on, student progress. The basic principles of assessment for learning are these:

- Teachers understand and articulate in advance of teaching the achievement targets that their students are to hit.
- They inform their students about those learning goals in terms that students understand from the very beginning of the teaching and learning process.
- Teachers are assessment literate and thus are able to transform those expectations into assessment exercises and scoring procedures that accurately reflect student achievement.
- They use classroom assessment to build student confidence in themselves as learners, helping them take responsibility for their own learning so as to lay a foundation for life-long learning.
- Classroom assessment results are consistently translated into informative feedback for students, providing them with specific insights as to how to improve.
- Students work closely with their teacher to review assessment results, so as to remain in touch with, and thus feel in charge of, their own improvement over time.
- Teachers continuously adjust instruction based on the results of classroom assessments.
- Students are actively involved in communicating with their teacher and their families about their achievement status and improvement.

In short, the effect of assessment for learning, as it plays out in the classroom, is that students remain confident that they can continue to learn at productive levels if they keep trying to learn. In other words, they don't give up in frustration or hopelessness.

Teacher Preparation to Assess for Learning

Few teachers are prepared to face the challenges of classroom assessment, because they have not been given the opportunity to learn to do so. It is currently the case that only about a dozen states explicitly require competence in assessment as a condition to be licensed to teach. There is not a licensing examination currently in place at the state or federal level in the United States that verifies competence in assessment. Since teacher preparation programs are designed to prepare candidates for certification in these terms, the vast majority of programs fail to provide the assessment literacy required to fulfill the tenets listed above. It has been so for decades.

Further, lest we believe that teachers can turn to their principals for help, it is currently the case that almost no states require competence in assessment to be licensed to be a principal or school administrator at any level. As a result, assessment training is almost nonexistent in administrator training programs. It has been so for decades.

As a result, we remain a national faculty that is unschooled in the principles of sound assessment—whether used of or for learning. This fact has been a matter of the research record for decades. To date, as a nation, we have invested almost nothing in assessment for learning. Teachers rarely have the opportunity to learn how to use

assessment as a teaching and learning tool. And our vigorous assessment of learning in the context of our various layers of standardized tests cannot overcome the effects of this reality.

As a result of this state of affairs, we face the danger that student progress may be being mismeasured day to day in classrooms across the nation. That means that all of the critically important day to day instructional decisions made by students, teachers and parents may be based on misinformation about student success, resulting in the following dangers, among others:

- Misdiagnosis of student needs,
- Student misunderstanding of their ability to learn,
- Miscommunication to parents and others about student progress, and
- Virtually no “assessment for learning” in classrooms.

The consequences for student learning are clear.

Relevant Policies

The potential impact of this problem has not gone unnoticed. Many have anticipated the consequences and suggested concrete action. For example, during the 1990s, virtually every professional association related to teaching adopted standards of professional competence for teachers that includes an assessment component (Wise, 1996). This includes the American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association, Council of Chief State School Officers, National Board of Professional Teaching Standards, and National Council on Measurement in Education.

Among these was a collaborative statement of assessment competencies for teachers developed by a joint committee representing AFT, NEA and NCME (1990). In this case, the expectations hold that teachers should be trained to: choose and develop proper methods; administer, score and interpret results; connect assessment results to specific decisions; assign grades appropriately; and, communicate effectively about student achievement, among other standards. It is troubling to realize that those standards are more than ten years old and still have had little impact on teacher and administrator preparation.

In their 2001 report, the Committee on the Foundations of Assessment of the National Research Council (Pellegrino, Chudowski, and Glaser) advanced recommendations for the development of assessment in American schools that included the following:

Recommendation 9: Instruction in how students learn and how learning can be assessed should be a major component of teacher pre-service and professional development programs. This training should be linked to actual experience in classrooms in assessing and interpreting the development of student competence. To ensure that this occurs, state and national standards for teacher licensure and program accreditation should include specific requirements focused on the proper integration of learning and assessment in teachers’ educational experience.

Recommendation 11: The balance of mandates and resources should be shifted from an emphasis on external forms of assessment to an increased emphasis on classroom formative assessment designed to assist learning. (p. 14, emphasis in original)

Similarly, the Commission on Instructionally Supportive Assessment convened by the American Association of School Administrators, National Association Elementary School Principals, National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Education Association, and National Middle School Association included the following in its list of nine requirements for state-mandated accountability tests:

Requirement 8: A state must ensure that educators receive professional development focused on how to optimize children's learning based on the results of instructionally supportive assessment. (2001, p. 25, emphasis in original)

We understand what teachers need to know and the proficiencies that they need to develop in order to be able to establish and maintain productive assessment environments. The challenge we face is that of providing the opportunity for teachers to master those essential classroom assessment competencies. The depth of this challenge becomes clear when we realize that we must provide opportunities for new teachers to gain these competencies before entering the classroom and for experienced teachers who had no chance to master them during their training.

The Great Promise of Balancing Assessments OF and FOR Learning

Therefore, our national vision of excellence in assessment should be making certain that assessments of and for learning are accurate in their depiction of student achievement and are used to serve those valuable purposes. Since our standardized assessments of learning are developed by professionals and are currently in place, they are poised to detect any improvements in the level or rate of student achievement. But these tests only provide information once a year. We must not delude ourselves about their ability to serve all assessment purposes. They can serve to reflect large-group increases or decreases in learning on an annual basis and serve as gatekeepers for high stakes decisions. They cannot inform the moment to moment, day to day, and week to week instructional decisions faced by students and teachers seeking to manage the learning process as it is unfolding. They cannot diagnose student needs during learning, tell students what study tactics are or are not working or keep parents informed about how to support the work of their children. These require the use of assessments for learning. The critical school improvement question is, what would happen to standardized test scores if we brought assessments for learning on line as a full partner in support of student learning? Several published reviews of research reveal the startling and very encouraging answer.

Research Results

In 1984, Bloom provided a summary of research on the impact of mastery learning models comparing standard whole-class instruction (the control condition) with two experimental interventions, a mastery learning environment and one-on-one tutoring of individual students. One hallmark of both experimental conditions was extensive use of classroom assessment for learning as a key part of the instructional process. The analyses revealed differences of as much as two standard deviations in student achievement attributable to differences between experimental and control conditions.

In their 1998 research review, Black and Wiliam examined the research literature on assessment worldwide asking if there is evidence that improving the quality and effectiveness of use of formative (classroom) assessments raises student achievement as reflected in summative assessments. If so, they asked, what kinds of improvements in classroom assessment practice are likely to yield the greatest gains in achievement?

They uncovered and then synthesized over 250 articles that addressed these issues. Of these sources, several dozen directly addressed the question of impact on student learning with sufficient scientific rigor and experimental control to permit firm conclusions. Upon pooling the information on the estimated effects of improved formative assessment on summative test scores, they report unprecedented positive effects on student achievement. They report effect sizes that would lead us to expect percentile score gains of from 15 to 30 points or three or more years in grade equivalent terms. The authors report score gain, which if applied to the most recent TIMMS international math assessment results would have raised the United States from the rank of 21st out of 41 participating nations to the top five. They go on to contend that “improved formative assessment helps low achievers more than other students and so reduces the range of achievement while raising achievement overall.” (p. 141) This result has direct implications for districts seeking to reduce achievement gaps between minorities and other students. Hypothetically, if assessment for learning, as described above, became standard practice only in classrooms of low achieving minority students, achievement gaps would be nearly erased.

The second question asked what specific improvements in classroom assessment are likely to have the greatest impact on student learning. They report that the greatest achievement gains are associated with

- Increased accuracy of classroom assessments,
- The delivery to students of frequent informative feedback, rather than infrequent judgmental feedback, and
- Deep student involvement in the classroom assessment, record keeping, and communication processes—that is, application of the principles of assessment for learning.

From this, they conclude as follows:

Thus self-assessment by pupils, far from being a luxury, is in fact *an essential component of formative assessment*. When anyone is trying to learn, feedback about the effort has three elements: redefinition of the *desired goal*, evidence

about *present position*, and some understanding of a *way to close the gap between the two*. All three must be understood to some degree by anyone before he or she can take action to improve learning. (p. 143, emphasis in the original)

It [classroom assessment] guides students' judgments about what is important to learn, affects motivation and self-perception of competence, structures their approaches to and timing of personal study...consolidates learning and affects the development of enduring learning strategies and skills. (p. 467)

Expected Benefits of Balance

Students benefit in several critical ways. First, they become more confident learners because they get to watch themselves succeeding. This permits them to take the risk of continuing to try to learn. The result will be greater achievement. Further, they come to understand what it means to be in charge of one's own learning—to monitor their own success and make decisions that bring greater success—and that represents the foundation of life long learning.

Teachers benefit because their students become more highly motivated to learn. Further, their instructional decisions are informed by more accurate information about student achievement, increasing the power or impact of those assessments. Teachers benefit from the time savings that result from their ability to develop and use classroom assessments with increased efficiency.

Parents benefit in seeing greater enthusiasm for learning in their children, greater achievement and in understanding that their children are learning to manage their own life long learning.

School administrators and instructional leaders benefit from the reality of meeting accountability standards and the public recognition of doing so.

Political officials benefit in the same way. Schools work more effectively and they are recognized as contributing to that outcome.

In fact, everyone wins. There are no losers.

The cost of achieving such benefits is the high-return investment in teachers and their classroom assessment practices. It is the initiation of a program of professional development specifically designed to give them the expertise needed to assess for learning.

An Action Plan

Therefore, our mission in the integration of assessment into the school improvement process in the United States should be to achieve a far better balance our reliance on assessment for and of learning. Both are essential. One is in place, while the other is almost totally missing. Specifically, it is proposed that:

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- Teacher and administrator training programs be revised to assure that graduates are assessment literate—both in terms of promoting and documenting student learning
- Local school district hiring standards be revised to screen for classroom assessment literacy
- States and school districts appropriate assessment resources in equal proportions to assure the accuracy and effective use of both assessments of and for learning
- A comprehensive long-term professional development program becomes the highest assessment priority in the United States resulting in the initiation of a nationwide effort to overcome decades of neglect by providing teachers with the opportunity to develop their classroom assessment literacy.

Only then can we assure families that their children are free from the harm that will result from the mismeasurement of their achievement in schools. Only then can we maximize student confidence in themselves as learners. Only then will we raise achievement levels for all students.

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