



LEARNING POINT

How do we design assessment systems for modern learning?

Authors Jay McTighe and Greg Curtis have outlined a blueprint for vision-driven schools that meet the needs of 21st century learners. This Learning Point summarizes their framework for curriculum elements and assessment principles that address all the learning goals we have for modern learners—not just those that are easiest to test and grade.

What do we mean by modern learning?

Today's students need to learn more than just information and content; they also need deep understandings of important ideas and processes that enable them to transfer learning to new situations. As a result, a modern approach to curriculum mapping calls for educators to shift their focus from inputs (what will be taught and when) to outcomes (students transferring their learning to new situations, issues, and problems).

This means designing backward to frame and develop a modern curriculum in terms of its desired impact—what we want learners to be able to do with their learning—instead of simply listing content inputs to be taught. Step one in that process is to identify long-term transfer goals within and across the disciplines, which then become the outcomes from which to backward-plan a curriculum, from grade 12 to prekindergarten. Backward-mapping calls for collaborative efforts in identifying:

- working definitions for goals;
- performance indicators;
- overarching understandings;
- essential questions; and
- cornerstone performance tasks.

Cornerstones are curriculum-embedded performance tasks that anchor the curriculum to the most important performances learners need to carry out on their own using their content knowledge and skills. They provide the means for educators to collect evidence—through assessment—of student growth toward learning outcomes.

Principles of effective assessment of student learning

An effective assessment system at the district, school, and classroom levels requires a set of underlying principles to ground it and guide its design and implementation:

Assessment should serve teaching and enhance learning. In addition to being a means to evaluation and grading, assessment should primarily be a feedback system to provide teachers and students with specific information to enhance teaching and student performance.

Multiple measures provide a richer picture. Inferences about what students know, understand, and can do are more dependable when they are based on information obtained through a variety of forms of assessment.

Assessments should align with goals. Because there are different types of goals

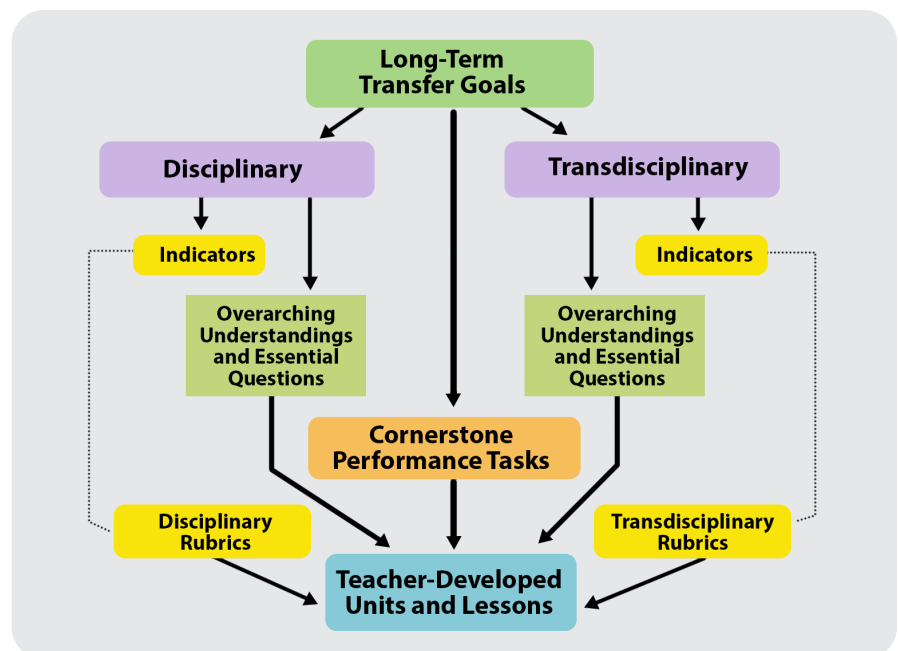
(such as knowledge, 21st century skills, understandings, and transfer), we need a variety of assessments to provide the proper evidence that the goals have been reached.

Assessments should measure what matters. If you want students to be able to transfer their learning to new situations, then schools need assessments that call for transfer in authentic situations.

Assessments should be fair. A one-size-fits-all approach to assessment may not always be fair or appropriate.

Planning and implementing an assessment system

A set of principles similar to those above, adapted and affirmed through local collaborative dialogue, serve as a guiding light for a planning process that involves three steps.



Step 1: Examine the existing assessment system

A review process can reveal whether your current assessment system reflects a fundamental idea of backward design—that assessments should align closely with all targeted learning goals. If some outcomes are not assessed, then they might be regarded as unimportant.

Step 2: Analyze student goals and types of learning evidence needed

Each type of learning goal or outcome requires a somewhat different approach to both assessment and instruction.

Knowledge goals specify what students need to know, such as facts and basic concepts; evaluation is binary—either correct or incorrect—and uses objective assessments such as matching, true or false, or multiple choice.

Skill and process goals are procedural, identifying what students should be able to do; they call for learners to demonstrate their competence as described on a continuum of proficiency levels from novice to expert.

Understanding goals refer to the big ideas we want students to comprehend at a deep level; we evaluate them through performance assessments that require application along with explanation.

Disposition goals characterize productive ways of thinking and acting—within and outside of school; also known as “habits of mind,” they are assessed through a collected-evidence model of observations and student self-assessments, based on defined performance indicators, compiled over time.

Transfer goals highlight the effective application of knowledge, skills, understanding, and dispositions; assessment occurs through the set of cornerstone performance tasks mapped out across the grades.

Recognizing these different goal types is essential to appropriate assessment of them, which in turn supports a blueprint for modern learning that calls for students to understand (not just know) how to transfer their learning to new situations.

Step 3: Identify dimensions of transfer performance

The final step in planning a robust assessment system for modern learning is to identify the performance indicators for all valued outcomes. Unpacking outcomes down to performance indicators is essential for assessment because they point out the particulars to look for when evaluating student performance. The indicators also serve as clear targets for learning and instruction.

It is helpful to categorize performance indicators into broader performance dimensions that can serve as traits on a rubric. The unpacking process results in a solid conceptual framework—across grade bands—for clarifying, communicating, assessing, and teaching transdisciplinary outcomes. It also helps all stakeholders (teachers, students, and parents) to see where students are starting from and what they are building toward.

Importance of cornerstone performance tasks

Just as a cornerstone anchors a building, cornerstone performance tasks should anchor the curriculum. They engage learners in applying their learning in authentic contexts as a means of providing evidence of their ability to transfer—the ultimate goal of schooling.

Once teams select or develop cornerstone performance tasks, they can become the basis for common assessments. Common (agreed-upon) performance tasks at each grade level:

- Reflect the transfer goals the district, school, or department has committed to develop and toward which all teach-

ing and learning should be directed.

- Provide evidence that student growth is being systematically tracked over time on outcomes that matter most
- Help ensure a guaranteed curriculum in which all students have opportunities to develop and demonstrate important goals, regardless of which teacher they have.

Schools can ensure coherent progression for students by developing cornerstone task maps that lay out a set of recurring performance tasks across grade levels and subject areas. Districts are challenged to construct maps that achieve balance among various discipline areas while including transdisciplinary outcomes. Another challenge is to avoid excessive standardization by inviting student and teacher voice and choice within cornerstone tasks.

Summary

A systematically developed set of cornerstone performance tasks provides the necessary structure through which a district, school, or department can collect the assessment evidence necessary to gauge the growth of students' abilities to transfer their learning in authentic situations. Common cornerstone performance tasks do not replace more traditional classroom assessments or standardized tests meant to allow for comparisons across schools, districts, or states. Rather, they play an important role in a comprehensive assessment system.

When educators enact comprehensive systems for assessing all educational goals—including the broader transfer goals—they can use the resulting evidence of student performance to check that they are on track toward the modern learning they seek. This evidence also provides the answer to the fundamental question for districts and schools: Are we delivering on our mission?

TO LEARN MORE

“Beware of the Test Prep Trap,” by Jay McTighe, 3.1.2017.

<https://jaymctighe.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Beware-of-Test-Prep-.pdf>

Measuring What Matters (Parts I and II), by Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins, 2010.

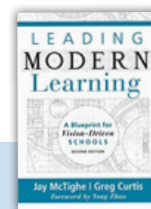
<https://jaymctighe.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Measuring-What-Matters.pdf>

“Three Key Questions on Measuring Learning,” by Jay McTighe. *Educational Leadership*, February 2018, pp 14-20.

<http://bit.ly/2V0b4RR>

Literacy Design Collaborative, 2014. Offers a set of generic templates educators can use to create cornerstone performance tasks for language arts, science, social studies, and technical subjects.

<http://literacydesigncollaborative.org>



This Learning Point was adapted with permission from the second edition of *Leading Modern Learning: A Blueprint for Vision-Driven Schools, 2nd ed.* (Solution Tree Press) by Jay McTighe and Greg Curtis. Learn more about the book and the authors at solutiontree.com/products/leading-modern-learning.html.

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