

# Assessing to Meet Student Needs

## In Post-pandemic Schools

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We have reached a watershed time in American education as we transition to a post-pandemic world. Just as remote and hybrid learning challenged teachers to teach and assess in new ways, so too will the return to in-person learning. The limited array of efficient assessment methods together with limited teacher time make it difficult to identify and meet the learning needs of all students. Without question, educators are facing immense assessment challenges.

The discussion that follows analyzes the evolving educational context in terms of its implications for the development of plans for our assessment future. This analysis begins by identifying strengths of current assessment policy and practice. Then it turns to the challenges educators face in attending to both the academic and social-emotional needs of students post COVID. Current and evolving circumstances will require that we turn to the very best current knowledge of truly effective assessment policy and practice to build on strengths to find solutions to the assessment challenges that accompany both returning to post pandemic operations and planning long term for our preferred assessment future. Out of this analysis will emerge specific recommendations for immediate action as we emerge from the pandemic and beyond.

### The Assessment Context Today

Educational assessment is the process of gathering evidence of student learning to

inform educational decisions. This process informs a wide variety of decision makers who make a wide range of decisions, all of which have a direct impact on student well-being in school. For this reason, to be truly effective, our assessment systems must serve the information needs of all of these users at all levels of decision making from the classroom to the boardroom. Further, all assessments used must meet the highest standards of quality so as to provide dependable information. The quality and impact of instructional decisions are only as strong as the dependability of information upon which they are based. So, quality assessment practices are foundational. A number of factors can contribute to our thinking about and planning for the strength of assessment in American schools.

### Strong Foundations Already in Place

One strength is our societal shift in the institutional mission we have assigned to schools. Schools used to be places intended to

sort students along a continuum of achievement by the end of high school. One important role of schools had been to begin the process of sorting people into the various segments of our social and economic systems. But over the past two decades, we have come to understand the insufficiency of this mission. We have articulated lifelong learning skills essential for survival in our rapidly evolving culture. In response, school and community leaders now also hold schools accountable for *“leaving no student behind”* in these terms: *every student is to succeed*, meaning they will be *prepared for college success or career training*. Rather than conceiving of assessment as a way to rank and compare students and institutions, we also can use them to measure mastery of those essential lifelong learner competencies. Assessments previously conceived as a way to map differences among students now can be designed and used to contribute to the success of all learners.

A second strength is that the measurement community has been developing assessment strategies and practices capable of increasing, not merely measuring, student learning success. Assessments for comparing now are accompanied by assessments FOR learning, which motivate students by increasing their sense of the likelihood of their own success, thus promoting a sense of self-efficacy. The power of the emotional dynamics of this transformation is crucial to our assessment future, both immediate and long term.

In addition, we are stronger because our communities have become increasingly attuned to inequalities in educational opportunities and experiences students encounter across the range of social and economic circumstances. Annual tests can serve to identify where these inequities exist, but they have done little over

the decades to help fix the problems identified. However, assessment methods and procedures have emerged to provide immediate information for classroom-level instructional decision making, thus providing equitable support for the educational well-being of all students, regardless of social or economic family circumstances.

We can find strength in evolving priorities in assessment practice nationwide. Traditionally, the purpose of assessment has been to *certify* student learning (summative assessment). Recently, however, attention has shifted to using assessment to help students learn more and faster (formative assessment). This is because formative assessment practices have been linked to significant achievement gains, especially when students partner with their teachers and engage in self-assessment and goal setting while they are learning. Summative assessments have not demonstrated such close links to student learning or impact on their success.

Finally, by way of strengths, in recent years extensive work has been completed at national, state and local levels to develop and refine specific learning goals and to deconstruct them into classroom level learning targets. This represents a crucial foundation for the future development of high-quality assessment systems because it helps assessors know exactly what needs to be assessed, a key to quality assessment.

### Challenges to be Addressed

Without question, the biggest assessment challenge educators face as students return to classrooms is the fact that remote learning will have resulted in a wider range of achievement than educators have ever seen, let alone addressed. Support from home has always

contributed to student achievement; however, remote learning has demanded unprecedented levels of home support. Some families have resources, time, and ability to step in to keep their children on pace. But others have none of these advantages, most notably families of low socio-economic status at-risk children. The result is great diversity in student achievement. For the sake of success for all students, teachers need access to assessment results capable of helping them identify where students are post COVID on various achievement continua when they return. Only then can they plan instruction that meets students where they are. This requires continuous high-quality classroom assessment.

Then, once differences in instructional needs are identified, teachers will face the challenge of planning and managing the wide variety of interventions required to meet those needs. Once again, the assessment spotlight must turn to precise information of how individual students are performing in mastery of specific learning targets.

Annual accountability-oriented standardized tests are neither frequent nor precise enough in their results to provide the information teachers need. The only assessments that can work are those that provide almost continuous evidence of student achievement status and growth in mastering precise learning goals. This can only be provided by ongoing day-to-day classroom assessment. Teachers must possess sufficient knowledge of assessment accuracy and effective use of assessment information and processes, known as *assessment literacy*, to manage this successfully, which many have not yet had the opportunity to learn.

The strengths and challenges described above combine to bring us to the conclusion that we

face two fundamental issues as we look forward regarding assessment policy and practice. One centers on the fact that policy level beliefs have banked heavily on annual accountability testing as the way to improve schools. The result has been local, state, national and international large-scale assessment at a cost of billions. This thinking has dominated federal and state assessment resources so heavily that nothing has been left to support alternative uses of assessment to promote student learning success. If this does not change in favor of balanced assessment systems, the information needs of key instructional decision makers will continue to be ignored and student learning success will continue to be harmed.

In addition, to assess well and use assessment effectively, educators must be assessment literate. Without an understanding of the basic principles of sound assessment, policymakers will have difficulty setting policies that drive sound practice, and frontline educators will struggle to operationalize sound practices in their schools and classrooms. Often, these foundations of sound assessment practice are not present in today's educational institutions. Typically, neither teachers nor local school leaders have been given the opportunity to become assessment literate. Given the challenges at hand and the critical role of classroom assessment, this cannot continue to be the case.

### Building for Our Assessment Future

Despite these challenges, it is possible to look to the future, with optimism. The encouraging reality is that we know and understand what high-quality assessment looks like and how to build on the strong foundations described above to overcome the consequences of the pandemic. The assessment systems needed can

be built from a clear sense of assessment *purposes*, clear and appropriate *learning targets*, *accurate assessment* instruments, and *effective communication* of results all used in combination to promote student academic and emotional well-being.

### Assessment Purpose

In any assessment context, it is essential that assessors begin by answering this question: Why are we needing to gather evidence of student learning? Assessment is the process of gathering evidence to inform educational decisions. To build quality assessments, one must ask: Who is going to use the results to inform what specific educational decisions? This question must be asked and clearly answered by assessors—from the continuous day-to-day classroom assessment, to interim formative benchmark assessment, to annual standardized testing. Assessments must be specifically built or selected to meet particular needs with specific information. Now to be sure, the list of potential users and uses to be served is long and complex. Each user in each context makes a unique contribution to student well-being that others can't make. So, assessment must be purposeful.

A rank order of assessment users in terms of greatest likely impact on student learning success must place students and teachers at the top by far. They make the day-to-day decisions that drive learning forward and maintain student confidence in themselves. Teachers use assessments formatively to support student learning and summatively to grade it. Students make crucial data-based instructional decisions about what to do about their own results once they see them. Next comes school leaders who set and support implementation of curricular, instructional, and assessment policy and guide

the making of decisions about practice that lead to teachers' actions. Other assessment users include parents and members of the local community, along with local, state and federal educational policymakers.

Productive assessment systems anticipate and are built to meet the assessment information needs of each of these decision makers as they strive to enhance the learning environments for students. Annual tests have a role to play in certain contexts under certain conditions. They inform important policy-level decisions. But this is just a very small part of a much larger assessment enterprise within American education. They must be kept in perspective. Classroom assessments drive learning success. But typically, they have not been given the attention and support they need and deserve. Balance in assessment policy and resource allocation is essential moving forward.

### Learning Targets

In addition to clear purposes, assessors must begin any assessment event with a clear answer to the question, what achievement standards, curricular outcomes, or learning targets, are to be assessed? The assessment exercises (test items, performance tasks) must reflect these learnings, as must the assessment scoring procedures. These targets can form a solid foundation for good assessment and student learning success when they are:

- Clearly stated to promote agreed-upon meaning for teacher and student
- Confidently mastered by the teachers who are to impart them
- Appropriate for the students who are called upon to master them
- Arrayed in learning progressions that provide a basis for students and teachers to track growth

- Shared with students from the beginning of the learning in language they can understand with examples of strong and weak work

A great deal of work has been completed in recent years in this domain, resulting in state and district standards, college and career standards, lifelong learner standards and the like. Further, the deconstruction of standards into classroom-level learning targets and student-friendly language is well underway. These are foundational to effective assessment systems moving forward.

### Quality Assessments

The gathering of evidence of student achievement can be done well or poorly. If done well, it can feed directly into sound instructional decision making. Technical standards of quality have been well established and have been translated into practical, common sense terms for application day-to-day in the classroom. Those standards form the definition of what has been referred to above as “assessment literacy.” Specifically, they ask any assessor in any context to do the following:

- Identify a proper assessment method given the learning target(s) to be assessed
- Plan to sample the designated achievement domain with sufficient depth to inform confident inference about student mastery of the learning outcomes in question
- Build or select assessment that consists of high-quality exercises and scoring schemes
- Anticipate and act to minimize the effects of factors other than achievement (that is, any sources of bias) that might distort the results

Teachers spend a major portion of their professional time engaged in assessment-related activities. This represents a critically important part of classroom instruction. They typically spend a quarter to a third of their available professional time engaged in assessment-related activities. As already stipulated, the vast majority have never been given the opportunity to master the above technical standards of quality. Thus, there is reason for concern.

The same is true of local district and school leaders, as training is lacking there too. In this case, a lack of assessment literacy is more likely to lead to the selection of inappropriate published assessments intended for use across classrooms or schools as common interim or benchmark assessments. Such published tests certainly can provide teachers with the level of detail they need if they are designed and built to do so—that is, if they provide evidence of student mastery of specific achievement standards, as such evidence will be diagnostic. Gross scores are useless in identifying diverse student needs.

### Effective Communication of Assessment Results

The highest quality assessment is wasted if the results are miscommunicated to the intended user. Results are communicated effectively to intended users when the recipient understands the implications of those results. Only then can results have their intended impact on the recipient.

Keys to effective delivery of results vary according to the context of the assessment.

When the purpose of the assessment is to support student learning (formative assessment), feedback is most impactful when it does the following:

- Is delivered in a timely manner during learning, thus giving students the opportunity to act on it
- Focuses on outcomes the student has been given the opportunity to learn
- Focuses on specific attributes of the student's work
- Informs students about progress
- Advises on how to improve performance next time

In summative assessment contexts, such as report card grading, effective communication informs the recipient in clear and understandable terms of a judgment of the sufficiency of their learning in relation to pre-established and pre-announced achievement expectations.

### The Student's Role in Assessment

It has been our tradition to see assessment as a directional process in which teachers (or other adults) assess students. This is not incorrect, but it represents an insufficient description of how assessment really works in practice in the classroom. Students are critically important data-based instructional decision-makers, too. They see, interpret, and act on the results of the assessments of their own achievement. And the decisions they make about whether or how to respond to those results have a profound impact on their own learning success. They decide if they are capable of succeeding in this learning, whether or how much to try, and who to ask for help, among other crucial decisions. The point is, if they come down on the wrong side of these decisions, it doesn't matter what

the adults around them decide. Their learning stops.

Given the mission of leaving no child behind, of every student succeeding, of narrowing achievement gaps and developing lifelong learners, we can no longer have major segments of our student population giving up in hopelessness. These emotional dynamics are crucial to the development of truly effective assessment systems. The way to prevent this and set all students up for ongoing success is to build their sense of self-efficacy. In the context of the foundations of effective assessment described above, the ways to accomplish this are to do the following:

- Count them among the key assessment users who are built into our balanced assessment systems, and make sure they have access to the information they need to make productive decisions on their own behalf
- Translate achievement expectations into student-friendly versions that are shared with students from the very beginning of the learning, teaching them the vocabulary they need to converse about those learning targets, and sharing examples of strong and weak work so as to make clear to them the progression they are traveling and so they can track their own progress
- Engage them in continuous self-assessment as they are growing and in ways that reveal that their success is due to their own work
- Give them opportunities to communicate with others about their own learning challenges and successes with concrete assessment evidence to back them up

This kind of student-involved formative assessment is called "assessment FOR learning"

and it arises from an international body of research linking it to profound achievement gains throughout the range of student achievement. A new role in assessment for students is in order, one that builds their confidence.

### A Portrait of Balanced Assessment

Given the above analysis of assessment's diverse role in promoting effective schools and student learning success, balanced local assessment systems are essential. Such a system is described in a chart appended to the end of this paper. It is specifically and intentionally designed to meet the information needs of all important instructional decision makers. It is built around classroom, interim, and annual assessments used to serve summative purposes and two forms of Formative Assessment Purposes—one to meet teacher needs and the other to inform student/teacher team needs. Each cell identifies decision-maker, decision to be made, and the assessment information needed. Balanced systems serve them all.

Until recently, virtually all assessment attention and most resources have been devoted to the annual summative accountability testing cell on the lower right. Given the diversity demands of our current context and new understandings of sound assessment practice, priorities can and must change to favor the use of assessment as a teaching and learning tool as depicted in the rest of the cells of the table.

To be clear, the system described above and in the attached chart is a local school district system, because almost all of the educational decisions that drive school quality are made locally. Almost all of the decision-makers are local. Only school districts have schools, classrooms, students, teachers, and school

leaders. The role of state and federal assessment is to support local decision-makers by providing part of the student achievement evidence they need to promote student learning success.

### Assertive Actions in the Service of Effective Assessment

The assessment context described above suggests—in fact, demands—the reevaluation of how assessment fits into the development of effective schools. We have strengths in hand that encourage and will support that rethinking. We know how to assist teachers and school leaders in assessment as they welcome students back post pandemic. Specific actions are suggested below to help them face the new demands.

Further, and in a larger sense, a significant change of the mission of schools has given rise to the need to rethink the very role of assessment in our schooling processes over the long haul. Actions also are identified for this purpose.

### Immediate Actions

- Provide immediate and efficient professional learning options in assessment literacy where needed for teachers and local school leaders; center predominately on how to create and use high-quality classroom assessments.
- Acknowledge the urgency of helping teachers and students meet the challenges that accompany post pandemic learning; use assessment resources to track the new higher levels of diversity in student needs.
- Provide communities and local school leaders with information about the inequities that have been brought to light and have grown during the pandemic and

the roles assessment must play in addressing them.

- At the highest level of assessment policy, commit publicly to balanced assessment and set priorities within that context by making classroom and interim assessment a higher priority than annual testing and promoting formative during learning to supplement summative.
- Suspend annual accountability testing for a time and redirect those resources to build balanced local assessment literacy and systems.
- Establish a clearinghouse to evaluate and disseminate information about high-quality, potentially useful published diagnostic assessments that assess and report student mastery of clearly articulated and appropriate achievement standards.
- Especially in the lower grade levels, consider reporting student progress in the form of achievement standards mastered rather than traditional A-F report card, or at least make sure grades reflect mastery of pre-set standards.
- Provide funding/grants for states to use in helping local districts access or develop assessments meant to help capture where each student is relative to learning goals for their grade level.
- Caution states against using student growth measures as part of their teacher evaluation system because of the extreme challenges they face post-pandemic.
- Allocate resources for ongoing professional learning focused on principles of student-involved classroom assessment FOR learning practices.
- Provide states with guidance on establishing balanced local school district systems that meet the information needs of all who need it.
- Revise teacher and administrator certification standards and, therefore, preservice training programs in higher education to include assessment literacy training.
- In building assessment literacy throughout the American educational system on an ongoing basis, disseminate differentiated roles and responsibilities:
  - Teachers must be prepared to create or select quality assessments and use them to support and certify student learning success; they are the front line of quality assessment as they make it operational.
  - School leaders must be able to select quality published tests for interim use, set sound local assessment policies, and support teachers as they develop their assessment literacy; if they are to be supervisors of instruction, then they must be supervisors of classroom assessment.
  - Policymakers must understand, embrace, and support standards of sound assessment accuracy practice, promoting effective use in support of student well-being; they set professional standards and allocate resources according to balanced assessment priorities.

### Long-term Actions

- Establish a national commission to develop and disseminate a vision of excellence in assessment for American schools.

### Useful Resources

Stiggins, R. J. (2017) *The Perfect Assessment System*. Alexandria VA: ASCD. A study guide for district leadership teams seeking a balanced assessment system that meets all assessment user needs.

Chappuis, J. and Stiggins, R (2020) *Classroom Assessment FOR Student Learning: Doing It Right, Using It Well, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.* Hoboken NJ: Pearson. A learning-team (PLC) based professional development program designed to promote classroom assessment literacy for teachers and their supervisors.

See next page for

**Framework of a Balanced Assessment System**

### Framework of a Balanced Assessment System

Level \ Purpose	Formative Assessment for Management of Instruction	Formative Assessment FOR Learning	Summative Assessment OF Learning
<b>Classroom Assessment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key decision maker(s)</li> <li>• Important instructional decisions to be made</li> <li>• Information needed to inform decisions</li> </ul>	<p>Teacher</p> <p>What comes next in my students' learning?</p> <p>Standards in appropriate learning progressions; Evidence of standards mastered and not yet</p>	<p>Student/teacher team</p> <p>Help student know: What comes next in my learning?</p> <p>Student-friendly learning targets in learning progressions; Evidence of student's current place in progressions</p>	<p>Teacher</p> <p>What grade or standards mastered to put on report card?</p> <p>Evidence of student mastery of each required standard</p>
<b>Common Benchmark Tests</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key Decision maker(s)</li> <li>• Instructional decisions to be made</li> <li>• Information needed to inform decisions</li> </ul>	<p>Teachers; but students may assist in interpreting and acting on results</p> <p>Which standards do we tend to struggle mastering and why?</p> <p>Evidence across classrooms of standards we have failed to master</p>	<p>Curriculum and Instructional leaders, teacher teams, PLCs</p> <p>Which standards are our students struggling to master and why?</p> <p>Evidence from assessments across classrooms of standards not mastered</p>	<p>Curriculum and Instructional leaders</p> <p>Which standards are broad samples of our student not mastering?</p> <p>Evidence of standards mastered across broad samples using common assessments</p>
<b>Annual Tests</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key decision maker(s)</li> <li>• Instructional decisions</li> <li>• Information needed</li> </ul>	<p>Requires evidence of student mastery of each standard</p> <p>Curriculum and instructional leaders</p> <p>What standards did our students not master?</p> <p>Evidence of standards not mastered</p>	<p>There is no viable assessment FOR learning role for annual tests</p>	<p>District leaders, school board and community</p> <p>Did enough students master required standards?</p> <p>Proportion of students mastering standards</p>