

THE MOST COST-EFFECTIVE WAY TO IMPROVE OUR SCHOOLS

W. James Popham

University of California, Los Angeles

Everyone wants our schools to be winners. What society would not want its schools to be as effective as possible? From an egalitarian perspective, we recognize education as a means of maximizing the inherent potential of our children. Aristotle once opined that the greatest metaphysical evil of all was an unattained potential. And Aristotle was smart.

From a more political perspective, members of a society are well served whenever their schools do a superb job of teaching children. That's because the cherished values that keep a society running—values like democracy, hard work, and responsibility—are more apt to be transmitted to the next generation when the society's schools are sailing along successfully. Clearly, it is in a society's self-interest to make sure its schools are effective.

And this is one reason why the United States has undertaken numerous initiatives over the years to strengthen the quality of public schooling. Some of those initiatives have worked; many have not. But there is currently one school improvement strategy sitting quietly on the shelf, as yet untried. It's an approach that could be, hands-down, the nation's *most cost-effective* way to improve our schools.

This economical school-improvement strategy is to enhance educators' *assessment literacy*—that is, to improve educators' understanding of the handful of fundamental assessment concepts and procedures that will support better instructional decision making. Once equipped with this insight, educators can share it with others who have a stake in the effectiveness of our schools—namely, parents, policymakers, and students themselves. Assessment literacy represents a little knowledge that, if used sensibly, can promote gobs of goodness in our schools. And the reason is simple: better instructional decisions lead to better-educated students.

Obviously, there are other avenues to school improvement. We could double teachers' salaries so that tons of more talented young men and women would want to become teachers. We could dramatically reduce class sizes so that teachers could provide more one-on-one attention to individual students. Both approaches would likely boost school success, but both would be prohibitively expensive and difficult to enact in all communities.

In contrast, the promotion of educators' increased assessment knowledge costs a relative pittance. It can be done everywhere, and it can immediately inform test-based decisions that affect how our schools are operating, how our teachers are evaluated, and how our students are learning.

Consider that in almost all states and districts throughout the country, there are judgments being made about the instructional caliber of individual schools, and those judgments are based chiefly on students' performances on standardized achievement tests. But the tests being used for these evaluative purposes were never designed to perform that role, meaning test-based conclusions about which schools are good and which schools are bad are often baseless. Educators who are assessment literate can point out this fallacy and help put an end to such testing malpractice.

Well-designed tests—whether they target aptitude or achievement, are teacher-made and used in the classroom, or are standardized and required throughout an entire district—generate data that educators can use to infer what students know and can do. These insights allow educators to make comparisons among test-takers, improve ongoing instruction and learning, or evaluate instructional quality. But very, very few tests can generate data to support more than one of these missions at a time. Assessment-literate educators understand which kinds of tests to use for which purposes and how to interpret those test scores. Because the test-based conclusions they draw are apt to be accurate, the resulting actions they take to improve learning are more likely to be effective.

As another example, many of the standardized tests employed in schools are developed by commercial testing companies and sold to schools as a means of improving instruction. Yet, when students' test scores are returned to the schools, those results arrive in such excessively general terms that no one—not teachers, students, or parents—can figure out which instructional actions to take next. At the other extreme, some testing companies deliver score reports that provide a set of individual responses for every student, one item at a time, for teachers tasked with educating dozens if not hundreds of students every day. Making sense of such data is an overwhelming task, often sidelined by teachers' imperative to attend to student needs that are easier to diagnose. Assessment-literate educators know how to demand standardized tests that provide better, clearer, instructionally useful score reports.

If a sufficient number of assessment-literate educators call on educational officials to immediately halt today's harmful misuse of educational tests and reliance on unhelpful ones, those tests can be replaced by more suitable ones. But only educators who are themselves assessment literate will know whether the replacement tests are, in fact, suitable.

From *Assessment Literacy for Educators in a Hurry* by W. James Popham. © Copyright 2018 ASCD. ASCD grants permission for the reproduction and distribution of this content, with proper attribution, for the purpose of increasing assessment literacy. A shareable version is available from www.ascd.org/assessment-literacy-school-improvement.