

# thinkpoint

## Expanding assessment literacy: A pitch to American publishers

by W. James Popham, University of California, Los Angeles

Two missions are undertaken in the following essay. Mission One is to convince readers that the single most cost-effective way to improve our schools is to increase the assessment literacy of concerned clientele. Mission Two is to invite American publishers, chiefly those who publish books or journals dealing with educational testing, to participate actively in promoting a nationwide expansion of assessment literacy.

In turn, then, attention will be given to each of these missions—with the hope that readers of this analysis, having concurred with Mission One’s stress on assessment literacy’s importance, will support Mission Two. As indicated in its title, this essay constitutes an unabashed plea for American publishers to become meaningfully involved in a formal effort to promulgate increased assessment literacy.

Although publishers’ executives are the chief audience for this analysis, a vital secondary audience consists of anyone who might have an influence—major or minor—on those publishers.

Whether a reader, an author, or simply a citizen who wants to improve our schools, the opinions of such groups matter. Accordingly, the more widespread is the support registered for the dissemination strategy proposed herein, the greater will be the likelihood that such a strategy has a realistic chance of being born, then flexing its school-improvement muscles.

The “concerned clientele” of a proposed assessment-literacy initiative include practicing educators, particularly the teachers and administrators who run our schools. However, others who could benefit from expanded knowledge about educational testing include policymakers such as legislators or school board members, parents of school-age children, and members of the general public. Finally, students themselves could benefit from learning more about the types and applications of today’s educational tests. This is because, increasingly, test-based decisions have a serious

and sometimes irreversible impact on students’ lives—both during school and long after it is over.

### What’s assessment literacy?

What, then, is this “assessment literacy” that is at the heart of this proposal? Does someone need to become a full-blown

*Assessment literacy consists of an individual’s understanding of the fundamental assessment concepts and procedures deemed likely to influence educational decisions.*

(Popham, 2018, p. 2)

measurement specialist (that is, what’s known technically as a “psychometrician”) to possess assessment literacy? Happily, such is not the case. Whether we refer to educational tests as “assessments,” “measurements,” or “exams,” the requisites for bona fide assessment literacy are far less demanding.

Although modest differences

can be seen in the ways various writers define assessment literacy, their chief conceptualizations are similar.

Presented below, for example, is the definition of assessment

*Implementable school-improvement strategies simply must be cost-effective. Otherwise, such improvement strategies should be left to those preferring fantasy-based wants rather than actionable realities. We need real-world ways of improving our schools.*

literacy I have been employing for more than a decade, and that I will be using in the following analysis: Assessment literacy consists of an individual's understanding of the fundamental assessment concepts and procedures deemed likely to influence educational decisions. (Popham, 2018, p. 2)

Let's consider, briefly, the most important ingredients in this definition. First off, we see that to be assessment literate, a person needs to understand certain measurement-related concepts and procedures. The requirement for assessment literacy, then, is not to be able to carry out certain procedures or to implement certain conceptualizations but, rather, to understand the essential nature of those concepts and procedures. Moreover, the needed understandings are neither expansive nor exhaustive. Rather, the understandings necessary for as-

essment literacy are those that are apt to have a direct impact on educational decisions. And, as it turns out, there aren't all that many decision-influencing assessment understandings.

We might, of course, encounter some differences in the collection of essential assessment concepts and procedures to be understood depending on the specific audience involved. For instance, what a school principal needs to know about the reliabil-

ity of high-stakes accountability tests will differ from what a high school student should know about the reliability of college-admission predictor tests. On balance, however, the similarities of the key assessment-related understandings that various clienteles need to know about educational measurement are substantial.

### **Cost-effectiveness — a nontrivial consideration**

It is generally conceded that the U.S., as is true with many nations, wants its schools to be better. But if the proposals proffered for improving America's schools are basically unaffordable, such proposals are little more than wistful yearnings. *Implementable* school-improvement strategies simply must

be cost-effective. Otherwise, such improvement strategies should be left to those preferring fantasy-based wants rather than actionable realities. We need real-world ways of improving our schools.

To illustrate, if we were able to *dramatically* boost teachers' salaries, we would soon see many more of our most able college graduates opting for classroom careers. Would the nation's schools improve? You bet they would. But our society, at the moment, seems unwilling to underwrite the substantial cost of such a school-fixing strategy.

Similarly, if we could *substantially* reduce the number of children each teacher must teach, then the resultant student-to-teacher ratios would permit far more student-tailored instruction by classroom teachers and, consequently, would lead to far better educated students. But, once more, the unaffordability of such a fix would nix the deal. Our society, at least for the nonce, would not finance such a fiscal boost in support of school improvement.

*Because many of today's most important decisions about the ways we educate our youth are made on the basis of students' test-score performances, it is obvious that we need to use the correct tests when generating those scores.*

In contrast to the considerable dollars required to carry out either of these sure-winner improvement plays, let's see why

the promotion of assessment literacy could have a positive impact on our schools, yet do so for an affordable price tag. First, we can look at the “effective” aspect of the “most cost-effective” claim registered in this essay’s initial paragraph.

Because many of today’s most important decisions about the ways we educate our youth are made on the basis of students’ test-score performances, it is obvious that we need to use the correct tests when generating those scores. Indeed, consider the most recent edition of the Standards for Educational and Psychological Tests (American Educational Research Association, 2014), the preeminent set of test-development and usage guidelines issued by America’s three associations most concerned with educational tests.

intended purpose is not at hand, then assessment validity is simply not present should attempts made to base educational decisions on the test’s results.

Because essentially all of today’s evaluative uses of educational tests in judging instructional quality are made using tests *unaccompanied by convincing evidence* that students’ scores on a test accurately indicate the caliber of instruction, then many serious mistakes are certain to be made because of the questionable validity of test-based interpretations. Such mistakes will see ineffective schools regarded as winners and effective schools as

and has existed for more than two decades (Black and William, 1998), that if teachers employ classroom tests to make decisions about whether to adjust

*If we make the truly trivial monetary investment required to expand assessment literacy, this could decisively help American educators avoid the many serious measurement-based mistakes often encountered these days.*

their ongoing instruction—or to help students decide whether to adjust their own learning tactics—huge increases in student learning will follow. Yes, an assessment-literate individual will understand that this class-

room use of status-monitoring assessments—referred to as the formative assessment process—can have a whopping impact on improving students’ learning. Indeed, one reviewer reports that, when used appropriately, formative assessment can double the speed of students’ learning (William, 2013). Yet, because the costs of implementing this research-ratified assessment approach to better instructing students are modest, our failure to employ it

more widely constitutes another serious assessment-based mistake—a mistake that’s far less likely to be made by assessment-literate educators.

If we make the truly trivial mon-



In those significant, court-influencing guidelines, it is stipulated that a test must be accompanied by evidence supporting a test’s intended use. Indeed, if evidence corroborating a test’s

losers. The real losers from such test-based mistakes, sadly, are our children.

In contrast, a hoard of solid research evidence now exists,

etary investment required to expand assessment literacy, this could decisively help American educators avoid the many serious measurement-based mistakes often encountered these days. Not only could educators dodge the two super-significant

*Although we could identify tactics that, if implemented skillfully, might enhance the assessment know-how of one or more relevant groups, what we need desperately today is a potent multiplier mechanism by which we can reach many, many people—and soon. To address this need, I believe publishers of books and journals dealing with educational assessment could supply the grist to make assessment-literacy mills purr.*

mistakes described above, that is, using unproven evaluative tests and insufficiently using classroom formative assessment, but educators could also avoid many less serious test-based mistakes. Clearly, the cost-effective dividends of greater assessment literacy are downright alluring.

Hopefully having achieved, at least to some degree, the first mission of this essay, namely, emphasizing the cost-effective dividends of enhanced assessment literacy, we turn to Mission Two. This second mission is a proposal for enlisting the publishers of assessment-related books and journals to take part in formal solution strategy that would not only help improve the nation's schools, but also would be regarded as a socially

responsible undertaking on the part of American publishers.

### Message multipliers

It is claimed in the initial portion of this analysis that expanded assessment literacy will help improve our schools. The issue

to be considered in the concluding part of this analysis is not whether expanded assessment literacy can help improve our schools but, rather, how to bring about an expansion in assessment literacy.

The focus here, then, is transmitting assessment-literacy information to the several clientele who, abetted by greater assessment acumen, could help reduce assessment-fostered educational mistakes.

To get underway with an exploration of how to promote the acquisition of assessment literacy, we first need to consider from whence the information about educational testing's fundamentals currently emanates. Fortunately, we see some modest increases in the number of states requiring assessment coursework in their teacher-licensure programs. The textbooks in those pre-teaching or pre-administration courses can engender greater assessment literacy on the part of the students enrolled in those classes.

Although, in fairness, it must be

conceded that some of those textbooks are slathered with more psychometric esoterica than is needed by most clientele. Moreover, a number of professional associations appear to be engaging in serious efforts to promote their members' assessment literacy. Happily, we continue to see the publication of new books and journal articles clearly germane to the promotion of readers' assessment literacy. Recent books by Stiggins (2017) and Connelly (2018), for example, supply state-of-the-art views regarding the realities currently transpiring in U.S. educational testing, and what could transpire if we became truly bold. Along with others, I have written a "Basics" textbook about educational testing (Popham, 2017b). Yet, despite any modest long-term optimism we might have, the reality is that the sort of information necessary to promote greater assessment literacy is currently not reaching sufficient numbers of people.

Although we could identify tactics that, if implemented skillfully, might enhance the assessment know-how of one or more relevant groups, what we need desperately today is a potent multiplier mechanism by which we can reach many, many people—and soon. To address this need, I believe publishers of books and journals dealing with educational assessment could supply the grist to make assessment-literacy mills purr. The remaining paragraphs represent a modest attempt to encourage executives of American publishing houses to take part in such an effort—solo or in

collaboration with their publisher colleagues. Those publishers, of course, can be influenced to join such an effort by their authors and by their readers—even those who read an analysis such as this.

Copyright rules are important and eminently useful. If a publisher (or, in some instances, an author) does not have some form of protection from infringement by others, then a published book or article could be legally scavenged without penalty. Yes, having been on the receiving end of occasional royalty checks over the years, I am a solid fan of copyright protection.

Although the Fair Use sections of the U.S. Copyright Act indicate that small segments of a copy-

righted work, or even an entire work, can sometimes be used for noncommercial or educational purposes, even zealous proponents of expanded assessment literacy will sensibly be reluctant to become involved in potential copyright infringement litigation. Accordingly, copyright notices must be crafted so that a publisher (or author) grants use of a segment of a copyrighted publication for explicitly delineated educative uses only. The sort of language I have in mind is something such as “For the explicit promotion of assessment literacy.”

Yes, I am suggesting that authors be encouraged to identify relatively short segments of a book or an article that would be made available to anyone for use in the promotion of

greater understanding regarding assessment literacy. Indeed, in most instances, these copyright-released segments would have been written from the very get-go with assessment-literacy expansion in mind.

The purpose of these copyright-released segments would be to *make it easier for readers* to reach others in the promotion of assessment understandings—and, thereby—spread the word about educational assessment’s most important understandings.

For instance, suppose that while a middle-school teacher is completing a master’s degree course in educational assessment, she encounters a terrific treatment of techniques for reducing assessment bias in teachers’ classroom tests. The teacher



wishes to apprise her faculty colleagues about these techniques. Fortunately, the textbook being used contains a dozen one-page segments specifically designated for such a purpose—one of them addressing bias-reduction procedures. A quick trip to the school’s copy machine followed by a visit to the school’s faculty mail room and the deed is done. No walls to be climbed; no moats to be crossed. Easy!

### Particulars explored

I am not a publisher, of assessment related books or journals—or of anything at all. As a consequence, I know naught about the particulars regarding how

phrasing of the copyright notice would need to satisfy the attorneys of the publisher granting the copyright exception. Importantly, however, the language of the copyright notice would need to be inviting, not off-putting. The whole idea here is to make it easy for readers of a book to relay an author-identified (and publisher approved) segment to another person or group.

Given that these days we often dance in a digital ballroom, it would be imperative to make an electronic version of any such assessment-literacy message

for these assessment-literacy messages would typically be the readers of an assessment-related book or article, many

*Brief, clear explanations of key assessment concepts or procedures can do a world of good—if read and used by the right people.*

potential recipients are possible. The choices of target audiences would be those of the individuals who had initially done the reading. Let me illustrate with a real-world example of how this proposed promulgation strategy can work.

A book I wrote (Popham, 2018) promoting six essential understandings associated with educational assessment was recently published. In the final chapter of that book, I wrote four mini op-ed essays (roughly 700 words), each dealing with what I regard as a significant assessment issue facing educators and others. I was delighted when the publisher agreed to allow readers of the book to use the mini essays for purposes of promoting assessment literacy—in hard-copy and digital form. To my knowledge, this would be the first tangible example of the strategy being proposed herein.

To whom would an educator who has read an assessment-related book send an op-ed essay (written by someone else) advocating, for instance, the greater use of the formative-assessment process in the nation’s schools?



such a make-available arrangement would be implemented. For example, the specifics of the copyright notice appended to, say, a half-page description of the “Standard Error of Measurement” would need to be accompanied by a copyright notice granting the use of that segment for exclusive purposes of educating others regarding the concept being treated. The specific

es (ALMs) available—typically from the publisher’s website or elsewhere. Again, I am out of my depth in such determinations, but hard-copy and digital versions of all ALMs would both seem necessary if this approach were to have an optimal impact.

### Likely Audiences

Who would be the recipients of an ALM? Because the individuals deciding on the audiences

Here are a few likely contenders:

- (1) local town or regional newspapers
- (2) a school's faculty or a district's administrators—possibly followed up by an open meeting to discuss the issue described
- (3) parents of a school's or district's students—again, potentially followed by an in-person meeting on the topic treated
- (4) legislators or school-board members—accompanied by a personal note encouraging their reading of the transmitted op-ed essay
- (5) friends and colleagues—with the suggestion that, if those individuals are interested in doing so, they could themselves relay the essay to others.

Many distinctive dissemination tactics and audiences are possible, of course, and would best be identified as appropriate for the specific context at hand.

Although the example given above deals with a full-blown, albeit abbreviated

essay, much shorter ALMs are possible. Indeed, one can visualize books or articles containing terse, pithy treatments of such topics as “The Precision of Educational Measurement” or “Common Confusions Regarding Reliability.” Brief, clear explanations of key assessment concepts or procedures can do a world of good—if read and used by the right people. Nor need an ALM be limited to words-only explanations; a variety of video or audio options now exist, and could be skillfully inserted into a set of ALMs if the publisher were willing to underwrite the cost of such options.

It is important for publishers to recognize that, were they to undertake this sort of action, the costs need not be prohibitive. In many instances, the dollars needed reproduce relatively brief ALMs could be truly trivial.

### Publisher Payoffs

A marvelous marketing advantage can flow from a publisher's taking part in a program along the lines being recommended.

The message perceived by most people will be that any publisher who volitionally makes copyright-released assessment-literacy messages available to readers is a publisher who cares about the quality of our nation's schools and the job they do for our children. This is not a repugnant perception to promote.

A branding dividend of considerable significance sits there—waiting to be chosen and employed. A variety of subtle ways exist for publishers to let the world know of the good works they are doing—not in the interest of making more money but, rather, to help the nation's children be better educated. An advertising agency does not need a green gecko spokesperson to peddle such a message effectively.

Possibly, a group of publishers who were interested in following the sorts of suggestions set forth here might prefer to work together in collaboratively crafting the best ways to identify and provide ALMs for inclusion in their books or journals, not only in devising comparable copyright notices, but in working with their authors so that, as an intrinsic aspect of their ongoing authorial effort, the writing of



suitable ALMs by authors could be encouraged. However, as indicated earlier, I know squat about publishing, so perhaps collaboration would be regarded unfavorably in this instance. Thus, a publisher who really gets going on this sort of mission might well pick up some serious branding advantages by being seen as a “company that cares.”

From the perspective of the reader of an ALM-containing book or article, those who were deciding whether to relay such messages would, in all likelihood, become even more familiar with the topics being addressed than had no such ALMs had been included. Thus, from

an instructional perspective, the inclusion of effectively written ALMs would enhance, not diminish, the impact of the ideas an author intends to present.

What is being proposed is that we enjoin America’s publishers of educational assessment content to actively promote the creation of a whole new cadre of measurement messengers. And that, by providing them with an array of assessment-literacy messages, we help make their efforts more successful. The consequences of this activity, in time, would be the enhancement of key constituencies’ assessment literacy. From the perspective of our schools’ effectiveness, this would be a stellar result.

## References

- Black, P., and Wiliam, D. (1998). “Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, 80, no. 2 (October): 139-148.
- Conley, D. (2018) *The promise and practice of next generation assessment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Popham, W. (2017a). *Classroom assessment: what teachers need to know*. (8th ed.) Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Popham, W. (2017b). *The ABCs of Educational Testing: Demystifying the Tools that Shape Our Schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Popham, W. (2018). *Assessment literacy for educators in a hurry*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Stiggins, R. (2017). *A perfect assessment system*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Wiliam, D. (2013). “Assessment: The bridge between teaching and learning,” *Voices from the Middle*, 21, no. 2, (December): 15-20.

## Reflection Points

### Assessment literacy as a cost-effective improvement strategy

We invite you to join our ongoing dialogue. Use these questions to reflect alone or with colleagues. We also invite you to share your thoughts by emailing us at [assistant@michiganassessmentconsortium.org](mailto:assistant@michiganassessmentconsortium.org).

1. Do you agree with the premise that better assessment practices—implemented system-wide—would be a cost-effective way to improve educational outcomes for students?
2. Despite the availability of information that could promote assessment literacy, why does so little of it reach sufficient numbers of educators?
3. What challenges do you see in implementing a “multiplier mechanism” as an approach to improving assessment literacy throughout the education community?
4. What strategies could be employed to reduce those challenges?
5. Which target audiences could you potentially influence with what the author calls “ALMs—assessment-literacy messages?”

## Author



W. JAMES POPHAM PH.D. is Emeritus Professor in the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies.

## To learn more

The Michigan Assessment Consortium website contains a rich library filled with sharable assessment resources as well as online learning modules designed to increase assessment literacy among all education stakeholders. Explore these resources, then spread the word! Visit [www.michiganassessmentconsortium.org](http://www.michiganassessmentconsortium.org).