



# Using Assessment to Make a Seat at the Table for Every Student

By Kathryn Dewsbury-White, Ph.D.

Noted author Jason Reynolds, named as the Library of Congress's national ambassador for young people's literature in 2020, says that in his experience, children tell him, "You can't talk about my life and not include me. You have to make a seat for me at the table." This is a critical lesson for educators as we go about the work of assessing student learning.

The Latin root for the word assessment—"assidere"—means to sit beside. We define assessment as "the process of gathering evidence of student learning to inform educational decisions." In fact, we might argue the most important decisionmaker in the assessment act is the student. When we create a seat at the table for *all* students, we use assessment to provide accurate information about what each student knows and doesn't yet know and

what each student can and can't yet do to effectively support their learning. We want *all* students to have equitable access to the learning table, so we want to know about—and avoid—sources of bias that can distort assessment results.

## ENSURING FAIRNESS IN LARGE-SCALE TESTING

The pandemic has shone a light on inequities in society and how children are affected in the schools struggling to serve them. At federal and state policy levels, we use large-scale assessment to help pinpoint gaps in achievement among student population groups. This gross/macro-level information is designed to help us know where to focus resources. These assessments are constructed using agreed-upon Standards of Quality in test construction.<sup>1</sup> A Standard

of Fairness is applied in test construction in an attempt to eliminate bias and ensure equitable opportunities for students to show what they know and can do.

The educational assessment community understands the limitations of what large-scale tests used in schools can tell us. In a 2021 address, Michael Nettles, Senior Vice President for the Policy Evaluation and Research Center at the Educational Testing Service, outlined the research that is underway and being applied to improve the tests we use. More importantly, he said, "I believe our part to play as assessment specialists is to reconceptualize the assessment enterprise itself. . . This new era of assessment must be student-centered. It must accommodate students' different learning styles. It must expand their opportunities to demonstrate their skills and knowledge



rather than penalize them for who they are. It should nourish as much as measure. And it must take into account the non-school factors, such as race, ethnicity and wealth, that so powerfully shape a student's 'bandwidth' for learning."<sup>2</sup>

### BRINGING FAIRNESS STANDARDS HOME

Most of the assessment experiences students have, however, and the decisions we make from those assessment results are determined by administrators and teachers in local districts and classrooms. We already have the means to use assessment to understand who students are, what funds of knowledge they bring to the classroom, what their needs are as individual learners, and how to involve them in the assessment process so they become capable lifelong learners and contributors to their world.

Like large-scale test makers, classroom teachers and school administrators can use standards of quality to ensure the assessments and the assessment practices they use do not compromise equitable access to learning. The Five Keys to Classroom Assessment Quality are a model developed over many years, with content drawn from the measurement field and adapted to fit classroom contexts.<sup>3</sup> The model can be used to guide assessment development and to audit an assessment for quality. The first three keys lay out the conditions necessary for accuracy, and the last two are the conditions needed for effective use.

#### Five Keys to Classroom Assessment Quality

Identifying intended uses of assessment information.

Having a clear vision of the intended learning targets.

Ensuring that items, exercises, tasks and scoring guides meet standards of quality design.

Understanding and applying the formative assessment process in our daily instructional practice.

Effectively communicating the results (to the primary users of the assessment information).

Educators seeking to create equitable access to learning for all students need to work to eliminate factors that can compromise equitable access to learning **during an assessment event**:<sup>4</sup>

Language barriers.

Test anxiety.

Cultural insensitivity in the assessor or the assessment.

Insufficient time allotted.

Vague directions.

Poorly worded questions or prompts.

Educators also need to pay attention to assumptions and assertions that can be counterproductive to learning **beyond an assessment event**:<sup>4</sup>

Belief that anyone can succeed if they try hard enough, but overlooking disproportionate access to resources and support.

Inequitable questioning and discussion protocols.

Grading practices that penalize not already knowing, such as grading practice work.

Assessment practices that lead students to believe success is defined by grades alone.

## PUTTING STUDENTS AT THE CENTER

Classroom assessment refers not only to tests, quizzes or even projects that contribute to summative evaluation and grades. Everything teachers ask students to do—every assignment, every task, every activity, every discussion—is, or can be, an assessment, because students' responses provide information about their level of understanding or mastery of the learning at a given point in time.

When classroom work and assessment practices are designed to be student centered, they can accommodate different learning styles, embrace a variety of cultural contexts and offer expanded opportunities for *all students* to demonstrate skills and knowledge. We can engage with students in ways that nourish and celebrate who they are.

Policy makers can ensure standards of fairness and equitable approaches to assessment are used in local districts by committing to develop assessment literacy among the educators in their districts. Michigan's Assessment Literacy Standards, endorsed by the Michigan Board of Education in 2016, provide a common framework to assist K-12 educators, students, families and policy makers in becoming more knowledgeable about assessment purposes and uses. Michigan's Assessment Literacy Standards are available at [bit.ly/MI-ALS](https://bit.ly/MI-ALS).<sup>6</sup>

We can celebrate the diverse students we serve—and increase equitable opportunities to learn—when we adopt these known methods and approaches to assessment:

**Use preassessment practice well** to clarify your purpose, determine how information will be used and assess only to provide information teachers don't already have access to.<sup>5</sup>

**Use the formative assessment process**—embedded in daily planning and instruction—to improve student learning, increase student involvement, help teachers to be more reflective and support students to adjust their learning tactics.

**Use instructionally embedded assessments**—woven into the flow of instructional units—to provide rich opportunities to differentiate teaching methods and embrace the variety of learning styles students bring to the table.

**Use rich performance tasks** to give students the opportunity to show what they know, think, understand and can do—and are derivative of the outcomes that matter most to equip students to be lifelong learners.

These practices and others allow us to make fair and unbiased queries into what students know and can do. They ensure learning opportunities that are inclusive of all student populations because they invite

students—arguably the most important decisionmaker in the teaching-learning cycle—to the table, right from the beginning.

<sup>1</sup> American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association and National Council on Measurement in Education. (2009). *The Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*. Washington, DC: AERA.

<sup>2</sup> Nettles, M.T. (February 2021). *Using Assessment to Inspire Student Achievement*. Michigan School Testing Conference. Ann Arbor, MI: Educational Testing Service.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Chappuis, R.S. (2020). *Classroom Assessment for Student Learning: Doing It Right—Using It Well* (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition). Pearson and Stiggins, R.J., Arter, J.A., Chappuis, J. and Chappuis, S. (2004). *Classroom Assessment for Student Learning: Doing it Right, Using it Well*. Assessment Training Institute.

<sup>4</sup> Chappuis, J. (June 2021). *High-Quality, Equitable Assessment Design and Practices. Building a Better Assessment Future Conference*. Mason, MI: Michigan Assessment Consortium.

<sup>5</sup> Guskey, T.R., and McTighe, J. (2016). *PRE-ASSESSMENT: Promises and Cautions*. Educational, School, and, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Michigan Assessment Consortium. (2020). *Assessment Literacy Standards: A National Imperative*. Mason, MI.



**Kathryn Dewsbury-White, Ph.D.**

Kathryn is President and CEO of the Michigan Assessment Consortium, and can be reached at [kdwhite@michiganassessmentconsortium.org](mailto:kdwhite@michiganassessmentconsortium.org).