Robert J. Marzano, co-founder and CEO of Marzano Research Laboratory, is a leading researcher in education. A 2011 NAESP convention speaker, he has written more than 30 books and 150 articles on topics such as instruction, assessment, writing and implementing standards, cognition, effective leadership, and school intervention.

Principal magazine: In what ways can principals work with teachers to effectively assess the teaching and learning that is occurring in their schools?

Robert J. Marzano: The most effective way to really pick up whether students are learning or not is to look at what happens in the classroom. A state test isn’t going to reflect learning, necessarily, unless what the teacher is teaching is addressed by the state tests. That’s not to say we shouldn’t have state tests; it’s just not the best vehicle to identify what kids actually learn, of the content that is taught.

A formative approach is better than a strict summative approach to measure learning. Some people say you shouldn’t record formative scores—I respectfully disagree. If you record formative scores, what happens is you can pick up students’ learning over time; you can determine knowledge gained or value added, so it’s very powerful.

As far as measuring effective teaching, the best thing to do is start with a strong language or model of instruction that everybody in the district, ideally, or in a school, at least, agrees with. And then, also taking a value-added approach, have teachers determine their strengths and weaknesses on the model. Put more emphasis on the weaknesses, so every teacher every year identifies just a few strategies to work on. And given that in your language or model of instruction you have a scale for each element in your model, teachers can say, “Well, I’m starting at this level in the rubric or scale and by the end of the year, I’d like to get to this level.”

When you measure teacher growth and then compare that with student growth in teachers’ classrooms, you’ve got a nice combination of measuring teacher behavior and correlating that with student achievement. They go hand in glove.

According to the research, what elements are currently absent from teachers’ efforts to successfully conduct formative assessments and what can principals do to assist their teachers with this?

There are a lot of different opinions about formative assessments. Some people call formative assessment just finding out where students are in a given moment in time. I call that instructional feedback, which is very important and a component of formative assessment; however, what I think is missing right now is the actual recording of formative scores, so that both teachers and students can see knowledge gained. Those scores have to be, obviously, tied to specific tests, and those tests have to be attached to very specific goals. I think what’s happened with the formative assessment work is that people have said, “Let’s just find out where they are and let’s get informal feedback about what they know, what they don’t know.” That’s very, very important stuff, but to really get the powerful effect that people
have talked about in the literature is to be more formalized than that. Tracking progress—teachers do that, individual students do that. And everything’s tied to very specific goals.

It’s got to be a schoolwide effort. In other words, you have to get together and say, “For fifth-grade mathematics, what are the important topics in which our students aren’t doing well?” That’s usually when you look at the state test. Next you ask, “How do we get feedback on these specific topics in such a way that students can track their progress?” You want to see where they began and where they ended. So, you can’t just lay it on the teachers. I think that’s what a lot of principals do. It’s a systemic thing that takes some upfront work to do it well in the classroom.

What recommendations do you have for principals in their efforts to become skilled evaluators of effective classroom instruction?

You have to start with a common way of talking about good teaching. Without that, it’s almost impossible to get effective feedback. So that’s ground zero—a school, better yet a district, has to say, “Here’s how we define good teaching.”

Make sure your model includes assessment strategies, instructional strategies, management strategies, and also the planning for instruction. Once you have a robust language of instruction and [explain] why you’re talking about good teaching, then the principal needs to provide feedback using that model.

Let me qualify that. It’s best if the teachers have identified things within the model they’re going to work on first. Then the principal gives feedback on those things that are requested by the teacher. That doesn’t mean that the principal can’t give feedback on other things, but make sure the principal, instructional coach, or whoever is observing the teacher gives feedback on things the teachers have asked for. If you do that, teachers now have some say in the development process and there’s much more buy-in when they’re getting feedback on very specific things on which they’ve asked for feedback.

In your book, Formative Assessment & Standards-Based Grading, you write that “Unfortunately, grades add a whole new layer of error to the assessment process.” Please elaborate on what you mean by this.

Letter grades add error to the process of giving students feedback and add error to the process of measuring student skills because you’re putting together disparate things into one overall score or letter grade. Here’s the error: Let’s say I’m a student and I do really well in one topic in fourth-grade science, and moderately well on another topic, and really terribly on a third topic that was covered in fourth-grade science. When you mix that all together in an omnibus grade, you lose that information. You don’t see what students are weak on, what they’re strong on.

It even gets worse when you add things that aren’t academic in nature, for example, whether students do homework or not, their behavior in class, working in groups, etc. That’s a whole other set of disparate topics. The current system of having one omnibus grade for everything, it’s almost indefensible. However, it’s part of our culture and changing it is not an easy task.

Instead, a subject should be divided into a series of topics. In a given grading period, a student gets a score on each one of those topics—we tend to use a rubric-based approach—which can be combined into an overall grade if you absolutely have to give one. Instead of
one grade or score in language arts for sixth grade, you would get eight scores for the eight topics that were covered in that grading period.

What is the role of formative assessments in measuring 21st century skills? What will take is a real clear delineation of what you mean by problem-solving, decision-making, and responsibility—things that are typically considered 21st century skills. You actually can create descriptions of levels of performance in the form of a rubric or scale, and then track progress over time. The way you get scores for those areas is to use multiple sources. One would be teacher perception and observation of students. Another is student self-perception. Add it to teacher perception and you’ve got a pretty strong combination of data points.

Some of these things can be measured in traditional assessments, like for problem-solving, give kids a problem—not an academic problem—one where they’re forced to address an issue where there’s a goal and an obstacle in the way (which is the operational definition of a problem) and see how they perform. From that you can determine on some type of scale how well they’re doing. Given the nature of 21st century skills, formative assessment is even more necessary because they do not lend themselves to a single, paper-pencil test.

What does the research say successful principals do to develop effective professional learning communities? First of all they set them up. Just the act of setting up a professional learning community is a huge step in the right direction. Once you have your professional learning communities, make sure that they have a strong agenda. And it is not just about the initial agenda: How are our kids doing? That’s a very important initial agenda, but once you get passed that, it’s: What does good instruction look like? What are some sources or activities outside of the classroom we have to set up for students to increase their learning or ensure that all students learn? If you’ve done a good job with PLCs, you’ve got one of the most powerful interventions that we can use right now in public education.

THIRD ANNUAL COMMUNITY SERVICE DAY
NAESP’s Annual Convention & Exposition kicks off on Thursday, April 7, with a day of volunteer service at Booker T. Washington Elementary School, a K-5 school in Tampa, Florida. Community Service Day is a powerful demonstration of commitment during the NAESP convention that raises awareness of the importance of volunteerism and of principals helping each other.

Volunteers will complete hands-on projects such as landscaping and developing two outdoor reading areas with tables, stools, and benches arranged for the students to explore books outside the classroom. The landscaping in the reading area will also serve as an environmental space consisting of plants so students can participate in a variety of tasks that will help them to understand the basic concepts of plant growth, research, and reporting skills.

NAESP’s annual Community Service Day has been described by volunteers as one of the highlights of their convention experience. For the past two years, convention attendees have volunteered their time at local schools as a show of camaraderie and teamwork with their peers from around the country. During last year’s convention, about 100 principals joined forces to provide assistance to three Houston schools during the second annual Community Service Day, assembling playground equipment, completing landscaping projects, and beautifying campuses.

NAESP thanks Landscape Structures for its generous support in this project. For more information about Community Service Day, visit www.naesp.org/2011.
There’s recently been consideration given to opening teacher-led schools. Instead of a building principal in charge of the intricacies of leading a school, the teachers work together to address instruction, budgets, discipline, and other traditional aspects of a principal’s job. Based on your research on school leadership, what do you think are the risks of implementing this concept?

If teachers are expected to do that on top of what they do now, it doesn’t make any sense at all. If that translates into everybody doing their own thing, we’ll go backward because the effect of the school is not the added effect of the individual teachers. It’s the extent to which those teachers are good at what they do. But also the extent to which they’re all on the same page. So it could have great dangers if teacher-led means no leadership.

There’s got to be leadership; there’s no two ways about it. Someone has to lead. Lead, in terms of what curriculum looks like, what assessment looks like, what scheduling looks like, care and training of teachers, students, and parents. Those are all really important decisions.

What can attendees look forward to hearing and learning during your session at NAESP’s convention?

Regarding formative assessment and standards-based grading, what they can hear is a very specific approach that we’ve been working on for 15 years that, if taken seriously, will transform schools. Regarding how you help teachers get better, you’ll hear my views on another project about schools identifying a common way of talking about teaching. The result is you could find substantial growth in teacher expertise across the school district and, consequently, a substantial increase in student achievement.

Attend Marzano’s session during NAESP’s convention in Tampa, Florida, on Friday, April 8 from 1:30 to 4:30 p.m.

Motivation Math
Motivation Math is a versatile, supplemental math resource that prepares students for the state mathematics test. Research shows that motivated students are more likely to perform well in the classroom and on standardized tests. Motivation Math provides many opportunities for student success while building student motivation and math proficiency.

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Mitzi McAfee
Principal
Jackson-Roosevelt Elementary

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