



Common Core Assessments:

A Principal's VIEW

Four strategies to weather the “perfect storm” of new assessments and evaluations.

By Lucille McAssey

In the state of New York, some are referring to the current atmosphere as the “perfect storm.” No, I am not talking about Super Storm Sandy, a storm that devastated the northeastern coastline. I am talking about the convergence of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), high-stakes assessments, and our new teacher and principal evaluation system, referred to as annual professional performance reviews (APPR). Our school, like many others, is doing its best to weather this storm in positive and productive ways that will ultimately benefit the children we serve.

Waverly Park School is a small, suburban public school that is consistently ranked among the top schools in the state. Our staff consists of dedicated teachers who are supported by parents who value education. In addition, we are fortunate to have central office administrators and school board members whose main goal is to always put children first. Local colleges and universities vie to partner with us to mentor and train the next generation of teach-

ers. We work hard to create a warm and caring environment where children thrive. In fact, the majority of our children go on to attend top-tier colleges, and many move back to the neighborhood to raise their own families. By these standards, we have always been considered a school of excellence.

So why is this year different? In 2013, the state of New York instituted the first round of more rigorous assessments that are aligned with the new Common Core Standards. Prior to students sitting for these assessments, the New York State Education Department informed schools and parents that scores across the state would drop, and they would not necessarily be indicative of deficiencies in student learning. Scores would instead be used to create new benchmarks. Educators across the state were concerned that these scores would also be used to evaluate teachers and principals, and could render a component of their rating as “developing” or “ineffective” if their students did not perform well.

Although there was a groundswell of concern among educators, throughout the year teachers and administrators worked feverishly to prepare their students. New curricula were developed, textbooks and materials aligned with CCSS were purchased, and staff

development was offered to prepare the teachers and administrators for the challenges ahead.

In April of the same year, students throughout the state were administered assessments in English/Language Arts and Mathematics. Each of the assessments took three days to administer, and students sat for 70 to 90 minutes per day. In addition to these assessments, stand-alone field tests were administered in each school, and additional field test questions were embedded into each of the testing booklets. We compared the process to building a plane while it is flying in the air. Despite the complications, we put forth our best efforts. But, as predicted by the New York State Education Department, our scores—like others across the state—were abysmal.

So, Where Do We Stand?

The teachers and administrators in our district understand that CCSS and assessments are necessary to prepare our children for college- and career-readiness in a global market. We also agree that assessments aligned with CCSS will provide relevant data that will assist us in determining how well our students are meeting these more rigorous expectations and how they compare to other students across the nation.

We do, however, take issue with assessments that are implemented in a rushed manner, that have elementary school students sitting for longer periods of time than are required for most professional licensing and certification exams, and that test learning without students and teachers having the benefit of materials and resources necessary to receive and deliver appropriate instruction. Most unsettling to anxious and overly stressed educators is the use of these scores to rate teacher and principal effectiveness.

A major challenge is to get past the negative perceptions of the standards and assessments reform agenda, especially in a system where teachers and

principals largely perceive assessments as punitive. We instead need to focus on the positive aspects of our school’s three-pronged approach to change: implementation of CCSS, using data to inform instruction, and using APPR to drive the movement forward. Here are four strategies that we have determined are key to thriving in this shift of expectations.

1 Speak the Same Language

There is little doubt that if change is going to occur, the entire school community—including administrators, teachers, students, parents, and school board and community members—must speak the same language about assessments and their ultimate purpose. Change can only begin when everyone understands the distinction between formative and summative assessments, and how the two work together.

The process starts with formative assessments, which provide data to inform the teacher and student where they both stand in the learning process. The last link is the summative assessments that determine whether or not students are appropriately prepared to meet CCSS’s increased rigor. These summative assessments are an important source of feedback on the effectiveness of schools, administrators, and teachers, as well as crucial data to modify curricula and instructional practices to increase student learning.

At our school, we began the conversation with ongoing staff development for teachers and administrators that focuses on vertical alignment of curricula, and the development of formative assessments. Additionally, we engaged in opportunities for continuous vertical alignment among the different grade levels.

Second, we developed rubrics that help students evaluate their own progress, which allows them to become important stakeholders in the assessment process and ultimately, in their own learning. We are motivated by the argument that Richard J. Stiggins makes in his book, *Student-Involved Classroom Assessment*: students who are involved in their own learning and assessment develop increased self-confidence and motivation to learn.

Last, a team of educators was selected to inform the public about the Common Core and their related assessments. We educated parents through presentations to the school board and PTA. In addition, we used district news publications and websites as vehicles to promote the common language of meaningful assessments and their direct relationship to improved teaching and learning.

2 Use Multiple Data Sources

In our district, we use multiple data sources to provide valuable information about student learning that moves beyond the snapshot of a single high-stakes test. These include individualized reading assessments, writing samples, formative and summative classroom assessments and portfolios, and teacher observational data. As Michael J. Schmoker notes in his 2006 analysis of the American educational system, *Results Now: How We Can Achieve Unprecedented Improvements in Teaching and Learning*, providing teachers with time to meet regularly to carefully examine assessment data, set goals, share and create lessons, develop common formative assessments, and review student work will ultimately lead to a better end result. Student learning will increase and assessment scores will accurately reflect that learning.

Principal ONLINE

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➤ The Parents’ Guide to Student Success, developed by the National PTA, provides **information for parents**—in both English and Spanish—about what students are expected to know at each grade level under CCSS.

➤ Stay ahead of the tech curve by using the State of Washington’s Common Core State Standards crosswalk tool to **pinpoint areas where technology can support standards**.

➤ Read “**Schools as Effective Data Users**,” in *Principal* magazine’s archives, to learn more about how to implement data-based solutions in your school.



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Our next task was finding the time in increasingly overbooked schedules to review data—without removing teachers and principals from the classroom. We accomplished this by instituting more focused and effective use of common prep periods and grade-level meetings. As a result, fledgling professional learning communities are starting to develop. We also used a provision in the teacher contract that had never been used that set aside the second Monday of the month for after-school meetings. Teachers welcomed this additional meeting time as another opportunity to work collaboratively toward our common goal to continuously improve student learning.

3 Stay Ahead of the Tech Curve

As a school district of excellence, an ongoing goal is to keep up with the latest advances in technology, and the staff development to support it. To address ever-changing technological advances for student learning and assessment opportunities, our district uses technology staff to provide an “on demand” model of staff development.

With new initiatives implemented this year, including reading and math programs that offer extensive digital components for teaching, learning, and assessments, our technology staff provides on-site training and individualized support for teachers as the need arises. In addition to stand-alone computer labs, laptops and iPads have replaced banks of computers in each classroom. This forward thinking enabled us to adopt a computer adaptive reading and math screening

platform that we are using for the first time this year in our continuous goal to assess learning.

Additionally, we use several tools that support CCSS and help students become active participants in their own learning.

Moodle, one of our online learning environments, provides a range of interactive functions such as collaborative book clubs and virtual field trips. Another tool, Photo Story, helps us meet the Common Core writing requirement that students use digital tools to produce and publish writing. A tool we use for formative assessments is the Classroom Performance System, a student response system that students can use to respond to their teachers’ questions and provides teachers with immediate feedback.

Last, but certainly not least, our district purchased document cameras, or “ladybugs” for each grade level. After a one-hour training session, teachers learned how to use this interactive tool to share student work, and video-tape and record presentations, all within the confines of their own classrooms.

4 Provide Tiered Levels of Student Support

We implemented Response to Intervention (RTI) in general education classrooms to provide tiers of support for all learners. Using the RTI tiered model of instruction allows us to target students’ individualized learning needs and provide more focused instruction in areas of concern, as well as in areas of strength. In our district, programs such as Read 180/System 44, Leveled Literacy Interventions, Great Leaps,

Phonics for Readers, and Math Diagnostic and Intervention System provide research-based interventions as well as progress monitoring tools to assess improvement or the need for more intensive interventions.

Ongoing data collection and regularly scheduled data meetings ensure that the data drives instructional practices and informs the types of support services, as well as advanced programs that we need to offer our students. Four to six weeks of progress monitoring provides additional data to determine what programs and methodologies are working and what needs to be changed.

In her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Carol Dweck writes about the difference between people with a growth mindset who are open to learning, and those with a fixed mindset who are closed to change. She argues that the way people think about themselves is critical to the learning process. When faced with a challenging task, if they believe that they can learn, that the task is worth learning and that the task is worth risking failure for, learning occurs. Dweck’s theory can be equally applied to the students who are faced with learning new standards and a new way to process information, as well as the educators who are tasked with leading their learning.

With the convergence of so many new initiatives, it is incumbent upon the building principal to promote a positive culture that facilitates change. In this high-stress educational climate, separating the fixed mindset of high-stakes assessments as a vehicle to rate and demoralize teachers from the growth mindset of using assessments for learning may seem like an arduous task. While it may be challenging, the extremely worthwhile goal of improved student learning is certainly worth the risk and the effort. 

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