Helping Teachers Help Themselves

by Judy Haptonstall

Frustrated by lack of increased student achievement despite the hard work of teachers and administrators, and overwhelmed with the amount of assessment data that was available but not very helpful, our district and building administrators embarked on a change that has had a very positive impact on student learning.

We started focusing on formative assessment.

While we have to pay attention to state and district assessment information, we have found that our most valuable information comes from teacher-developed formative assessments. These classroom assessments, when done effectively, improve teaching, motivate students and, as a result, improve student learning.

When we began five years ago, our goal was to make assessment information comprehensible and valuable for teachers. Since then, we have seen dramatic changes in student achievement when the process described here is used consistently. It is simple to use, but not easy to implement and sustain. However, if formative assessment is not the primary tool for improving student achievement in your school, all of the hard work done in many other areas could have very little impact.

1. **Provide teachers with the basics in assessment writing and thinking.**

   Read Rick Stiggins (2004) to understand the difference between assessment for learning and assessment of learning. His work encompasses a step-by-step process that includes understanding what you are trying to assess, the backwards design process, and student involvement. The most successful method we have found for implementing his practices is through an entire faculty book study.

2. **Provide teachers the time and structure to develop and analyze their own data.**

   Mike Schmoker’s results process (1999) is one of the best at providing the time, and a clear process for using it, to realize the power of formative assessment. Teachers working in teams with professional trainers identify key areas for instructional focus, discuss best instructional practice, develop common assessments, and analyze the effectiveness of their teaching, based on assessment results. All of this can be accomplished in just two half-hour meetings each month.

   In our district, we added some of the Annenberg Institute’s work on specific protocols for examining student work. Critical Friends Groups from the Institute have been instrumental in providing teachers the tools they need to make effective use of their time and to closely examine what students are producing.

3. **Make public the results and celebrate the successes.**

   Use the faculty lounge to post the results of your classes’ performance on formative assessments. This promotes the staff’s continued focus on key learning areas. It also creates an environment that encourages teachers to share, across grade levels or subject areas, what they are doing in their classrooms that make a difference with their students.

   Reeves (2001) suggests using a data wall at the school entrance to celebrate students’ learning. This public exposure, in addition to informing parents and visitors of the school’s progress, reminds everyone in the building of the school’s academic goals and how it is meeting them.

   Use faculty meetings as staff development forums by asking teams of teachers to present their data and talk about effective practices to improve student achievement.
Only when teachers recognize that what they accomplish in the classroom is the main
determiner of student learning will we be able to renew their confidence in their professional
abilities. We have discovered that once teachers see the power of ongoing, effective
classroom assessments, they are able to overcome the idea that parental involvement,
socioeconomic status, or language status are the keys to student learning.

We’ve also found that once teachers see the power of working collaboratively, they make
two more important discoveries. One is that they can share the heavy workload of teaching in
today’s stressful school environment. The second is that they can give each other permission
to abandon ineffective practices or unfocused instructional goals.

References

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