How Assessment Data Can Improve Instruction

Elizabeth Shellard

When the curriculum is aligned to state standards, frequent assessments are critical in ensuring that students are meeting those standards.

Over the last decade, nearly every state has established rigorous standards that define what students should know and be able to do. In addition, most states have also developed assessment systems aligned to those standards (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory 1998).

In response, most local education leaders have made these standards the objectives for classroom instruction, with teachers developing and delivering lessons designed to help students achieve those objectives. In the process, schools are finding that assessment data can be a powerful resource in ensuring that instruction is on target in effectively moving students toward the standards.

Midgett describes the interplay of standards, instruction, and assessment in today’s schools:

In a standards-based classroom, assessment is an integral part of instruction and is aligned with the curriculum. The teacher collects evidence of the students’ knowledge, their ability to use that knowledge, and their disposition toward learning. Student performance is monitored to promote learning, to adjust instruction, and to report progress (Midgett 2001).

Brett Gies, director of data analysis and program improvement for the Twin Falls School District in Idaho, has worked as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal. He provides an educator’s perspective on using assessment data for instructional improvement:

As a classroom teacher, I was frustrated. I didn’t always know specifically what my students were learning. And if, as a principal, I asked teachers: “How do you know your students are learning?” they didn’t always have a solid answer. That’s why I really appreciate the data that are available to us now...If we can measure what an individual child knows and doesn’t know, then we can provide the instruction he needs (Cawelti and Protheroe 2001).

IN BRIEF

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**Creating Assessment Tools**

Assessment needs to be done frequently to be effective in determining the pace of instruction, the need for remediation, and readiness for introduction of new material. Regular quizzes or other forms of assessment can help determine whether students have grasped an idea and are ready to proceed, or whether a remedial lesson or additional practice are necessary.

Jandris describes well-designed teacher assessment methods as:

- Embedded and ongoing in classroom instruction;
- Providing prompt, “user friendly” feedback;
- Giving early indications of whether students are learning;
- Producing both qualitative and quantitative data; and
- Being clear, both to the teacher and to students, as to its purpose and how the collected data will be used (Jandris 2001).

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction stresses the importance of using classroom assessment data to improve instruction:

> The positive result of classroom assessment is that decisions and actions are based on knowledge of student progress in relation to the learning targets. For example, the teacher may decide to re-teach key concepts, to move to the next unit of instruction, to regroup students for further instruction, or to allow more practice and application time. The cycle may then begin again, with the teacher’s identifying and clarifying the next learning targets (North Carolina Department of Instruction 1999).

**Making Assessment Pay Off**

If assessments are to have an impact on teaching—and student learning—aligning expectations, instruction, and assessment is crucial. However, the multitude of demands placed on educators and the limited time available necessitates a system that is time-efficient as well as effective.

Reeves briefly describes steps some schools have used to meet these requirements in developing assessment systems aligned with standards:

- Have faculty agree on the 12 most important standards for each subject in each grade.
- Have faculty teams design very short assessments that, over the course of a year, address these 12 standards. They should not take more than 20 minutes of classroom time each month.
- Provide some time in faculty meetings or scheduled group time to grade the assessments and to determine, based on the results, what changes may be needed in the schedule, curriculum, and teaching strategies in the coming weeks or months (Reeves 2004).

Using data to drive improvement shows up as a characteristic of many successful schools. Cawelti and Protheroe studied six school districts, all of which had significantly increased student performance on state-mandated tests despite serving high percentages of at-risk students. All of the districts began their improvement efforts after carefully reviewing assessment data.

Likewise, five other studies that focused on districts demonstrating significant—and rapid—improvement in student learning found that many of these schools and districts “developed benchmark assessments...[to] identify problems with student mastery of content and skills at the school, classroom, and student levels. The emphasis was on ensuring problems were identified and addressed quickly” (Cawelti and Protheroe 2003).

As Nancy Love summarizes, assessment should be an “integral part of instruction....The standards talk about curriculum, instruction, and assessment together, as a single vehicle....What unites them is a common focus on student learning” (Love 2001).
The challenge for schools is to ensure that these three elements are integrated, and not merely words in the school’s improvement plan.

**References**


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This article is based in part on the upcoming ERS publication *What We Know About: Using Classroom-Based Assessment to Improve Student Learning.*

**WEB RESOURCES**

The Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory maintains a database of standards and benchmarks and aligned instructional activities.

[www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks](http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks)

Links to standards in individual states is provided by the Center for Performance Assessment.


The North Central Regional Educational Laboratory’s Toolbelt provides links to resources to help educators collect and analyze data about their classroom, school, or district.

[www.ncrel.org/toolbelt](http://www.ncrel.org/toolbelt)