

Helping Teachers

“THINK I
ASSESS

Some critical shifts in thinking are needed if educators are to design realistic assessments to measure what students know and understand.

Marcella Emberger

In their book *Understanding by Design*, Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (1998) urge educators to “think like assessors, not activity designers.” When educators begin thinking like assessors, they plan backwards—designing assessments based on what they want students to know *before* they plan their learning sequence. This backwards planning process helps teachers know if their students are reaching the goals they have created for them.

Unfortunately, it is not easy to “think like assessors.” In many instances, principals and teachers have had little training in assessment. In order to think, talk, and act like assessors, they need to know the vocabulary of assessment, the process of designing good assessments, and how to examine the results of these assessments. This requires them to understand what Rick Stiggins (2002) defined as the difference between assessments *of* learning (summative/evaluative) and assessments *for* learning (ongoing, formative, and informative).

The Maryland Assessment Consortium has approached this challenge by developing a professional development program, based on Wiggins and McTighe’s work, that is designed to support principals as they work with their staffs to develop knowledge and practice of classroom assessments.

The program prescribes seven crucial shifts in current thinking:

From traditional supervision of teaching to looking at what students are learning.

Principals need to shift *from* entering the classroom and using the lesson plan as a guide to teacher performance *to* understanding that visiting classrooms includes looking for how well the students are learning, acknowledging that they and teachers are partners in collecting evidence of student understanding.

From “covering the curriculum” to ensuring what is taught is learned. Principals should shift *from* accepting teach-

IN BRIEF

In order to “think like assessors,” seven key shifts in thinking and practice are needed, ranging from principals’ classroom observations to teachers working in teams. The Maryland Assessment Consortium has developed a variety of staff development materials to assist principals and their staffs in making these shifts.

ers who rush to “cover the curriculum” *to* developing classrooms where students demonstrate what they know and are able to do in a variety of ways.

From focusing on textbook instruction to using multiple sources of information.

Principals should shift *from* accepting teachers’ reliance on textbooks as their primary source *to* encouraging teachers to develop meaningful, complex activities based on their ability to seek out a variety of appropriate sources.

From scheduled quizzes and tests to frequent formative assessments. Principals need to move their teachers *from* thinking of Friday, midterm, and final examinations as a way to see “who got it and who didn’t” *to* understanding that ongoing assessment is a better way to evaluate how well students understand.

From assessments that grade students to assessments that support student learning.

Teachers should move *from* using assessments *to* “fill in the blocks” in their grade books *to* using assessments as ways to provide students with an understanding of their progress.

From considering reading and writing as separately taught processes to providing instruction in all curricular areas.

Schools should change *from* having classrooms where reading and writing are assigned “because they should know how to do this” *to* having classrooms where teachers understand that students need direct instruction in

LIKE ASSASSINATORS

both reading and writing, since every content area has its own specialized language.

From working individually to working with teams. Teachers should shift from examining student work in isolation, resulting in inconsistent standards, to working in teams to establish fair and consistent standards.

The Need for Professional Development

But how do you make these shifts happen? For principals, it begins with an assessment of the current levels of their teachers' understanding of assessment: Who are proficient? Who are developing proficiency? Who are the novices?

One common factor required for all of the shifts is trust between and among all staff members. Trust is perhaps most important for the first shift—from observing the teacher to observing student learning. This requires the most intense effort by prin-

cipals because they must override deeply held beliefs that it is “unfair” to judge teaching based on how well students learn.

These shifts are not easy to make, even when one is provided with professional development materials. During the second day of a workshop for administrators, a principal stood up at the break and said, “I think I’ll go over to the human resources office and pick up my retirement papers.” Everyone laughed, but the reality of the difficulty of the task is clear to all who understand why the shifts need to be made.

In a recent article, Dennis Sparks states that in order to create these changes, it is essential that leaders: “alter what they think, say, and do in ways that are observable to others. Put another way, profound professional learning produces teachers and administrators who say what they have not said, believe what they have not believed, understand what they have not understood, and do what they have not

done. Without change in those vital areas, I believe very little of substance will change in ways that will improve teaching and learning” (Sparks 2005).

For educators to “think like assessors” and produce deep change requires thinking about how to reach each student, talking about assessments for learning, and implementing new processes for improving teaching and learning. Even with professional development materials and training, it’s a daunting challenge. ■

References

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- Wiggins, G. and J. McTighe. *Understanding by Design*. Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998.

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WEB RESOURCES

The Web site “Looking at Student Work” provides protocols for examining and discussing student work. www.lasw.org/welcome.html

The National Staff Development Council posts a free collection of articles describing ways schools and districts have made time for professional learning. www.nsd.org/library/resources.cfm

This site, created by a district technology advisor, offers links to helpful sites for evaluating student progress. www.suelebeau.com/assessment.htm

The Maryland Assessment Consortium Web site includes materials for school and classroom assessments. <http://mac.cl.k12.md.us>

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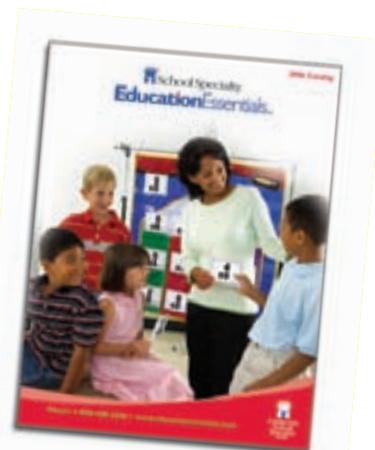
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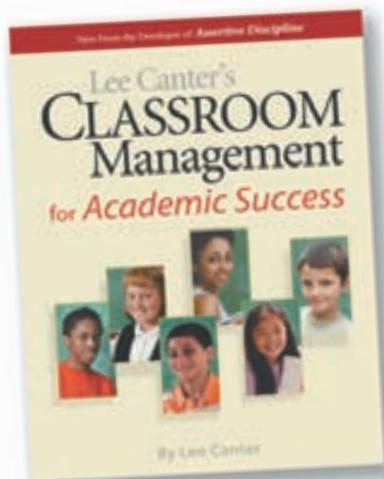
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