

Assessment That Supports Equity

Strategies to encourage progress instead of measuring what's already known

By Ann Jaquith

In education, assessments are often used to evaluate what students have learned—to sort, rank, or judge students based upon an evaluation of performance. Standardized state tests and those administered by the College Board are examples of assessments *of learning*.

In the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era and its aftermath, however, educators called attention to the damage done by the nation's persistent focus on assessments *of learning*. One concern is that repeated poor performance eroded students' belief in their own capabilities to learn. Another is that such high-stakes assessments reduced opportunities to learn. The high-stakes nature of the tests, along with the strict timelines to test every student, every year, meant schools spent an inordinate amount of time preparing for tests that consisted of multiple-choice or short-answer questions that were less expensive to score, and consequently,

did not require writing or extended problem-solving.

The damage was especially evident in schools serving large populations of historically marginalized and disadvantaged children, where students spent more time preparing for multiple-choice tests. In *Next Generation Assessment, Moving Beyond the Bubble Test*, Linda Darling-Hammond describes how NCLB narrowed the curriculum by using tests for consequential decision-making, which “can drive curriculum and instruction in ways that mimic both the content and the form of the test.”

Darling-Hammond argues that being able to answer multiple-choice questions does not mean students have the ability to answer the same questions in open-ended form. She offers evidence that “a focus on multiple-choice testing gives false assurances about what students know



and are able to do, not only on other tests, but more importantly, in the real world.”

Schools that performed less well on these high-stakes accountability tests tended to give students a steadier diet of instruction that mimicked the multiple-choice tests. As a result, students in lower-performing schools often had fewer opportunities to write, conduct research, make oral arguments, or reason with evidence than students in higher-performing schools—and, consequently, were less prepared for situations prevalent in daily life that require complex reasoning, weighing alternatives, and thinking deeply.

Concerned educators and citizens have demanded for decades that more attention be paid to another type of assessment—assessments *for* learning. Unlike standardized tests, this form of assessment promotes learning, rather than evaluating it. What is assessment *for* learning, and how does it differ from the more typical assessments *of* learning?

The Features of “For”

Assessments *for* learning can take many forms, but they tend to have important features in

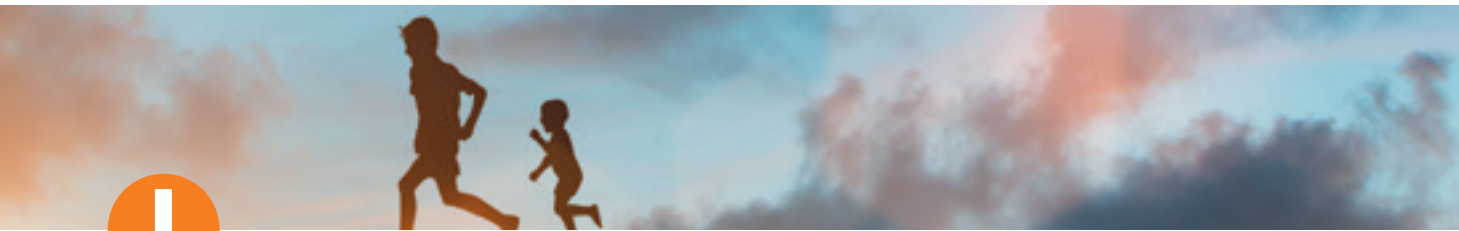
common. They are classroom-based. They are used during instruction. They involve students in the assessment process, and in so doing, help students take charge of their own learning.

Two common practices used in assessment *for* learning are student self-assessment and student peer feedback routines. By providing students with specific information about their learning and a clear description of the desired learning goal, students are better able to know what they need to do. This can help students experience greater success.

Receiving information that helps one learn can contribute to a positive self-image and confidence as a student, particularly for those accustomed to experiencing repeated failure in classrooms. When effectively used, assessments *for* learning can be an important lever for reducing persistent gaps in achievement.

Providing Useful Feedback

Knowing specifically what to do to improve hinges on the quality of the feedback received. The best assessments *for* learning generate specific feedback about the learner, how the learner approaches a particular task, and steps



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For examples of how schools and districts can support assessment for learning, visit the following resources:

- SCOPE: edpolicy.stanford.edu/library/publications/1601
- WestEd's Formative Assessment Insights: fa-insights.wested.org
- *Assessment as Learning: Using Classroom Assessment to Maximize Student Learning* by Lorna Earl
- The Assessment for Learning Project: www.nextgenlearning.org/grants/assessment-for-learning-project

the learner can take to increase the quality of his or her performance. In primary classrooms, running records are an example of a commonly used assessment.

“When taking a running record, the teacher listens to a student read a text and documents on a recording sheet what the student does,” says the 2017 article “How Will I Know What My Students Need? Preparing Pre-Service Teachers to Use Running Records to Make Instructional Decisions” by Erin Gillett and Susan Pierson Ellingson. “Standard conventions are used to indicate oral reading behaviors. Words read correctly are marked with a check, and other oral reading behaviors, such as substitutions, insertions, omissions, self-corrections, and repetitions have their own specific conventions.”

In other words, specific information is revealed and gathered about what the reader does when reading: what he or she does accurately, the types of errors he or she makes, and the frequency of each error type. Implicit is the importance of the teacher in gathering accurate and complete information; how skillfully the teacher administers the assessment matters to the quality of feedback given to the reader, which will then influence the reader’s opportunity to learn.

The specificity and quality of the feedback is critical for supporting learning. “When anyone is trying to learn, feedback about the effort has three elements: recognition of the desired goal, evidence about present position, and some understanding of a way to close the gap between the two,” according to *Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment* by researchers Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam. “If a teacher does not know how to take a running record accurately, then using the assessment can do little to promote a student’s learning.”

Knowledge of Subject and Learner

Effectively using assessments *for* learning is a demanding and complex undertaking. It requires deep knowledge of the subject matter and of the learner, paying attention to the

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design of the assessment and to the interrelationships among assessment, content, and the individual student.

In order to help each student take responsibility for his or her learning, the relationship between teacher and student might need to change. Teachers must understand (and look out for) how students come to understand and make sense of content, which will vary from student to student.

Teachers must be sensitive to how students of different backgrounds, communities, and experiences respond to these opportunities. Teachers—especially those of a different race and socioeconomic background from that of their students—will need to remain alert to their own biases if assessments *for* learning are to provide equitable opportunities for students to learn.

Teachers will need to talk with students frequently about their performance and their interests. Teachers will need to listen closely to what students say and provide ample opportunities for them to set their own learning goals and consider what helps them learn best. Teachers will also need to work with students to co-develop strategies that help students use assessment information to aid their learning.

Execution of the Assessment

The manner in which an assessment actually gets used ultimately determines whether or not it contributes to learning. Only if specific information is used by the teacher to guide instruction does the assessment actually promote learning. For instance, a teacher might take a running record for evaluative purposes, determining a student’s reading level in order to place him or her in a reading group. The

teacher's underlying purpose for using the assessment determines its use.

The specific information such assessments provide can help the learner discover what to do (or do differently) to improve his or her performance. Such knowledge can be powerful: Having this information and acting upon it can help a learner gain confidence, and the knowledge a teacher gains can indicate instructional adjustments that might help individual students experience more success.

Assessments *for learning* must be anchored in the belief that all students can learn to become levers for equity. The personal beliefs of teacher and student influence how much a student does, in fact, learn. Never assume that all adults in a school believe every student can perform to a high level. We are often unaware of our own personal biases and their insidious effects. In addition, research shows that in order to effectively teach students of a different racial, ethnic, and/or socio-economic background, the teacher must possess cultural knowledge about those students.

“Culturally responsive teaching is defined as using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively,” explains Geneva Gay in the book *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*. “It is based on the assumption that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly.” Our beliefs and knowledge of other cultures matter if assessment *for learning* is going to realize its potential to encourage equity.

Cultivate a Culture

Principals can (and do) influence teachers' beliefs and practices. They have an important role in promoting the widespread and effective use of assessment *for learning* as a lever for equity in schools. Here are three actions principals can take:


1. Educate teachers about the two types of assessment, their different purposes, and their features.
2. Communicate the importance of using assessments to promote learning, and ensure that the types of assessment used in classrooms are balanced. One way is to conduct classroom inventories of the assessments used over short periods of time

(e.g., two-week intervals), and have teachers describe how they used these assessments.

3. Create conditions to support the effective, knowledgeable use of assessments *for learning* as a lever for equity. Teachers should be expected to learn from their practice and teach for equity, and be supported in that goal. Here's how:

- Establish structures (e.g., regular times and spaces) in which teachers look at artifacts of instructional practice (e.g., samples of student work, videotaped segments of instruction, examples of assessments for learning they use) together for evidence of student learning.
- Develop professional routines for sharing assessment practices (e.g., communicating clear learning goals and indicators of successful performance to students or sharing ways to offer feedback) to dismantle the culture of teaching as a private practice and replace it with a culture of teaching as collaborative inquiry.
- Examine institutional (school, grade-level, and classroom) structures and belief systems to see whether they advantage certain groups of students and disadvantage others. Look at groups of students who aren't succeeding and ways those students might experience systemic disadvantages that prevent or hinder them from having the same opportunities to learn and succeed as other students. Determine what steps can be taken—and by whom—to break down systems of advantage and disadvantage, and take action to change biased institutional practices, procedures, and policies.

Assessments that promote learning can radically improve learning experiences for students in our nation's schools—and especially for marginalized students who often experience the greatest failures. However, this requires principals and teachers alike to shift from an evaluative to a learning mindset wherever assessment is concerned.

Principals must support opportunities for teachers to learn how to use assessments *for learning* effectively and create cultures of meaningful, equitable learning in their schools. For many schools and districts, such actions will represent a bold and revolutionary change. 

Ann Jaquith is associate director of the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE).



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For more information on what principals can do to develop conditions that promote professional learning, check out the author's 2017 book, *How to Create the Conditions for Learning: Continuous Improvement in Classrooms, Schools, and Districts*, and article, “Mapping the Conditions for Collaborative Learning in School Communities of Practice,” at edpolicy.stanford.edu/library/publications/1392.