



Varied, Layered, & Strategic Assessments

By Susan McLester



Best practices for ensuring that assessments guide instructional practices and honor student learning in the process.

Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, the issue of testing in America has become increasingly sticky and contentious. Drill and kill instruction, teaching to the test, narrowing the curriculum, and deadening the joy of teaching are among the common criticisms that have dogged the legislation that ramped up school testing to unprecedented levels.

Exacerbating the entrenched negativity associated with school testing is confusion among stakeholders about the purpose and value of various assessments. Results from a 2016 survey by the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) and Gallup show that most principals and other educators do not believe state and federal policymakers understand the purpose of different types of assessment, and most teachers say they're doubtful parents understand the formative assessments and diagnostic tools they use to adapt instruction to students. Also significant is that only 37 percent of principals find state accountability tests useful.

The recent enactment of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has opened up a whole new opportunity for public dialogue to help address this disconnect. It has formally shifted the focus of conversation from the limitations of single-source, grade-level testing to the more balanced multiple measures of assessment that organizations such as NAESP and the Wallace Foundation have been actively promoting for years.

Finding the perfect approach to ongoing student evaluation remains a work in progress for principals, schools, and districts across the country. Their complex challenge is sorting out how to integrate different layers of assessment into their school cultures, clearing up misperceptions, communicating clearly with stakeholders, and learning to collaborate with state and local education agencies.

From reports such as the Wallace Foundation's *The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning*, we know there is a direct link between school leadership and student achievement, as principals have the considerable potential "to unleash latent capacities" in the organizations they lead.

I spoke with Wallace Pipeline Project principals from three different districts to learn how they are unleashing such capacities within their schools while addressing two of Wallace's five keys to effective leadership that deal with assessment—improving classroom instruction, and managing people, data, and processes to drive student performance.

Multiple Measures Means Multiple Layers

There is widespread agreement among the principals I spoke with for this article that multiple measures of assessment requires multiple layers of assessment to be successful.

At the K-5 Lawrenceville Elementary School in Georgia, principal Lisa Johnson says assessments span state, district, schoolwide, team, and individual teacher levels. At the beginning of the school year, all district students are given a cognitive abilities test intended to be a predictor of how they will score on the statewide test. Teachers look closely at the results for each student, comparing their actual scores to the predicted scores, and in cases where matches are significantly off—either plus or minus—drill down with Johnson and her administrative team to uncover and address the exact influencing factors.

A schoolwide, yearlong program focuses on the area of vocabulary and assessment literacy through making sure that students understand the words used in statewide assessments. "We often found that the students knew the material, but weren't familiar with the exact words used in the test problems," says Johnson.

Every nine weeks, reading levels are tested for all students, with instructional coaches on hand to help teachers with strategies and activities for those not making the expected progress. Both struggling and advanced readers are given interventions, either individually or in small groups. A daily schedule builds in a 30-minute block that allows teachers to re-teach and re-test, with the assistance of support staff.

Strong teacher teams who can work together to develop common grade-level and subject-matter assessments are also at the core of the strategy at Lawrenceville Elementary. These teams coordinate every two weeks to give assessments, in



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The Wallace Foundation identifies five key practices for effective principal leadership:

1. Shape a vision of academic success for all students.
2. Create a climate hospitable to education.
3. Cultivate leadership in others.
4. Improve classroom instruction.
5. Manage people, data, and processes with the goal of school improvement.

math, science, language arts, and other areas to ensure no students fall through the cracks.

Individual teachers also assess performance-based tasks, such as collaborative projects like writing and drawing pictures for a book, or researching history and creating a video with a voice-over. Teachers also craft end-of-unit assessments that incorporate the cross-curricular skills of writing and grammar along with subject area content, and they meet regularly with individual students for ongoing progress checks.

Also at the classroom level are individual lesson knowledge-retention tests. Students can use “clicker” personal response systems or their cell phones to respond to comprehension questions as a lesson progresses and just after it is over.

Parent Buy In and Understanding

In the NWEA poll, six in 10 parents said their child’s teachers “rarely or never discuss assessment results” with them.

At Lawrence Elementary, there are the regular parent conferences for all students, including meetings via phone for parents who can’t get time off work, and all parents also receive copies of every single one of their child’s assessment results, including state assessments.

The school also offers after-school training for parents. A six-week Common Core math program, for instance, is designed to help adults understand new ways of instruction so they can better help their children with homework.

The school also harnesses technology to keep parents up to speed on what is being taught and tested in class. School and classroom websites provide links to videos, information, and resources where parents can learn more. The school also uses tablets in some classes and allows students to check out Nooks and take them home.

“I think the biggest change we’ve seen from traditional approaches to education and what we’re looking at now with ESSA has been the growing shift to a student-centered culture. It’s not about teaching,” says Johnson. “It’s about what the kids learn.”

A bit north and east of Lawrenceville, Georgia, is the K-5 Palisades Park Elementary School in Charlotte, North Carolina. Like Johnson, principal Gina O’Hare implements a layered strategy to ensure students benefit from multiple measures of assessment.

“It’s all about planning and strategy,” says O’Hare. “We do schoolwide yearlong planning, and grade-level teams do weekly, and sometimes, daily, planning.”

The state and national standards are front and center for the full staff at Palisades Park Elementary. From September through December, the standards are taught and re-taught schoolwide and teachers circle back regularly to ensure students remember what they’ve learned. “We re-loop every day to see what they’re retaining,” says O’Hare.

At the team level, grade-level teachers create common, aligned assessments as they do at Lawrence Elementary, ensuring that writing, reading, and literacy skills are reinforced in all classes, such as science, where students maintain journals.

When small group or one-on-one instruction/interventions are needed, teachers do a good



job of pulling students together and re-teaching a concept by explaining it in a different way, says O'Hare. But what's really raised test scores, she says, are the "exit tickets," or quick assessments to test for understanding, at the end of each class.

Like Johnson, O'Hare harnesses technology to communicate with parents. School and classroom webpages allow parents 24/7 access to assignments, explanations, and practice problems, and they can also tweet the teacher for additional information that will help them support their children at home.

In the works for Palisades Park Elementary are formal assessments that will test students on "soft skills," such as communication, collaboration, sharing, showing respect, and other qualities that help students become college- and career-ready. "Managing differences and getting along with each other is so key to workplace success, says O'Hare. "Going forward, I want to be sure our kids have those skills."

Not far from North Carolina in Brandywine, Maryland, Danielle Moore is focusing a lot of her school team's energy on assessment literacy for students at the grades 6-8 Gwynn Park Middle School where she is principal. "When it comes to taking the state assessments, I don't want there to be any surprises," says Moore. "Our school assessments mirror the state assessments."

As with Lawrence Elementary, students learn the vocabulary, but also the format and basic computer skills—such as dragging and dropping and highlighting—that will ensure the test is familiar to them. Moore also implements the "exit ticket" strategy schoolwide to cover the "small snippets" of content teachers want kids to retain from daily lessons.

Technology enables Moore and her teachers to keep parents updated twice weekly on their children's progress. Parents can see resources, request conferences and keep up to date with grading policies. Special Saturday sessions from 8 to 11 a.m. require that parents drop off and pick up their kids for interventions. Moore says holding such sessions on Saturdays allow both students and teachers to come to a concept refreshed and ready to work.


Perhaps most challenging of all the assessment strategies Moore has implemented during her five years as principal at Gwynn Park is the questioning of the purpose of testing that many teachers have just "always done." Tough conversations can include questions about what the test measures and what kind of information

can be gleaned from it. It forces a deep dive into data and its usefulness for student achievement. All in all, Moore's focus is the "very intentional building of awareness" in all stakeholders of the academic progress of each student, which she wants to be top of mind for every stakeholder.

Mining the Data Is Key

In the NWEA report, less than 50 percent of teachers said they looked at student data more than once a quarter, if that, and many admit not feeling comfortable with analyzing data. If there were one single element of effective student assessment to be stressed throughout the examples here, it would be the importance of a staff well-trained in the analysis of data and in the appropriate follow-up actions.

Data walls displaying student initials and progress, fall faculty meetings where the names and faces of struggling students are shared, and lots of quick data gained at the end of each lesson add up to a schoolwide team strategy where all members take responsibility for student progress. Says O'Hare, "We all have to help. Even one weak link brings us all down as a team."

Fifteen years ago it would have seemed unbelievable that someday school leaders would be asking teachers to justify assessments they were giving students. Today, principals like Lisa Johnson, Gina O'Hare and Danielle Moore are setting examples for the kind of truly purposeful, intentional, and valuable assessment that acknowledges the complexity and potential of all students and promises to send them into the world well-prepared for success. 

Susan McLester is a freelance education writer in Berkeley, California.



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