

Assessment Leadership

Leading a Balanced, Comprehensive Assessment System to Improve Teaching and Learning

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Problem of Practice

School and district leaders are charged with improving student learning outcomes in their systems and achieving equity goals of closing performance gaps between subgroups. Having meaningful data about student learning is an essential system input for making the decisions about teaching and learning that will produce equitable learning outcomes. But surfacing meaningful data is dependent upon the soundness of the tools and processes used to collect and analyze the data.

Assessment is the process of gathering evidence of student learning through tools, like tests, and processes, like formative assessment, in order to inform decisions about teaching and learning, from the classroom to the district level.

Districts and schools have to navigate a complex field of assessment tools that produce data of varying quality and utility. These tools include state-level assessments that meet federal and state accountability requirements and are increasingly designed to link more closely with classroom practice by offering aligned interim assessments and formative assessment resources. In addition, districts and schools purchase a variety of supplemental assessment products, including interim or benchmark assessments across subject areas, diagnostic assessments, and assessments offered by the publishers of their adopted curricula. These

supplemental assessments may or may not be well aligned to the state assessment system or state standards. At the same time, teachers are engaged in their own formative assessment of student learning minute-by-minute and day-by-day in the classroom, for which they are creating their own assessment tools.

With so many assessments and so much data available, are students, teachers, and leaders able to translate assessment data into improved learning outcomes? To do so, they need a system of assessments that is comprehensive and balanced, as well as time and a culture that supports using evidence of student learning for advancing equitable student outcomes. Not having these pieces in place can lead to over-testing, ineffective allocation of time and financial resources, and the under-utilization of valuable information that could be used to improve outcomes for students (Sigman & Mancuso, 2017).

But a comprehensive, balanced assessment system and a culture of effective evidence use do not emerge by accident. They take capable leadership to build. Assessment leadership is essential for building a comprehensive, balanced assessment system and fostering the conditions in which meaningful assessment data can be used to produce improved learning outcomes at all levels of an education system, including the classroom, school, and district (Cizek, 1995; Noonan & Renihan, 2006).

Comprehensive, Balanced Assessment Systems

Different stakeholders need different kinds of information about student learning because they are making different kinds of decisions. Teachers and students may need fine-grained information about where students are in a learning progression so they can make decisions about adjustments to instruction in upcoming lessons. School and district leaders may need information about patterns of student performance to inform priorities for resource allocation, like professional learning or curricular resources.

And so, schools and districts need a variety of assessments that can provide decision-makers, including students, teachers, teacher leaders, and parents, with meaningful information for the educational decision-making required to ensure students meet learning outcomes. In a comprehensive, balanced assessment system, no single assessment is relied upon to provide evidence that it was not designed to collect. Additionally, a comprehensive, balanced assessment system should value summative assessment that focuses on looking back at a learning period to measure what has been learned *and* formative assessment that takes place during learning to provide feedback to teachers and students about next steps in instruction (Sigman & Mancuso, 2017). *Knowing What Students Know: The Science and Design of Educational Assessment* (National Research Council, 2001, p. 9) states that in a balanced assessment system, “assessments at all levels — from classroom to state — will work together in a system that is comprehensive, coherent, and continuous. In such a system, assessments would provide a variety of evidence to support educational decision-making. Assessment at all levels would be linked back to the same underlying model

of student learning and would provide indications of student growth over time.”

However, a comprehensive, balanced assessment system that can truly support learning outcomes for all students requires more than just specific assessments and assessment processes. It requires a culture in which practitioners have what can be called “assessment literacy” that empowers them to make appropriate use of assessment data. Assessment literacy is knowing the appropriate assessment to administer to surface meaningful evidence of student knowledge, skills, and abilities, and knowing how to interpret that evidence to make decisions that improve student learning and program effectiveness.

Michael Fullan (2001) identifies assessment literacy in terms of capacity:

- » The capacity of teachers and principals to examine student performance data and make critical sense of them
- » The capacity to develop action plans based on the understanding gained from the aforementioned data analysis in order to increase achievement
- » The corresponding capacity to contribute to the political debate about the uses and misuses of achievement data

For this understanding of assessment literacy and the culture of assessment literacy that supports its application, practitioners need to have both the knowledge and the conditions that support these capacities. Building the knowledge, supporting a shared vision, and creating the necessary structural conditions require assessment leadership (Cizek, 1995).

Assessment Leadership

The concept of assessment leadership is not a new one and, in fact, can be found in education literature as far back as the 1990s (Cizek, 1995). Even so, this aspect of instructional leadership has not typically been an area of focus in school leader preparation or professional development.

Assessment leadership is the capacity to enact a comprehensive, balanced system of assessments and support a culture of assessment literacy that can use evidence of student learning to produce equitable learning outcomes for all students. School or district administrators, teacher leaders, technical assistance or professional development leaders, or other stakeholders may take on the role of assessment leader. The following areas reflect some core competencies for assessment leaders.

1. Understand and clearly articulate a vision for assessment anchored in a knowledge of fundamental assessment literacy concepts

Assessment leaders must have a solid understanding of the fundamental concepts supporting assessment literacy and decision-making about assessments, and they must use that knowledge base to articulate a clear, compelling vision for assessment in their system. According to research reviewed for this summary, successful assessment leaders should develop the following kinds of expertise:

- » **Have deep knowledge of the standards:** Assessment leaders are first and foremost instructional leaders who can connect curriculum and assessment with high-quality teaching and learning practices. Therefore, assessment leaders must have a deep knowledge of the academic content standards and the desired outcomes for students (Cizek, 1995).
- » **Understand assessment purposes and uses:** Assessment leaders have a strong understanding of different types of assessments, their purposes, and appropriate uses of the data they produce and how different assessments work together in an overall system of assessments (Sigman & Mancuso, 2017). They must also establish a common language for, and understanding of, key assessment concepts (Cizek, 1995).
- » **Understand and apply criteria for high-quality assessment:** Assessment leaders steer efforts to evaluate the quality and utility of specific assessment tools and processes in order to make decisions about current assessments and about new assessment resources. Therefore, assessment leaders must be able to discern a high-quality assessment from one that is not well-suited to a particular purpose. This ability also requires a general understanding of some key elements of assessment design, including things like different item types, rigor, fairness, and scoring that can inform the evaluation of assessment tools and inform support of teacher assessment practice in the classroom (Sigman & Mancuso, 2017).
- » **Understand and support formative assessment:** Effective formative assessment practice is central to a comprehensive, balanced assessment system and culture of assessment literacy. Assessment leaders understand that formative assessment is a *process* engaged in by both teachers and students *during* instruction to order to adjust teaching and learning. Assessment leaders understand the conditions necessary to support high-quality formative assessment

practices in classrooms, and they value and prioritize the wide variety of formative assessment data that can show where students are in their learning and what they are ready to learn next (Linquanti, 2014).

2. Engage stakeholders to develop a complete picture of all assessments in place in order to evaluate and make decisions about a comprehensive and balanced local assessment system

To develop a complete picture of the current system of assessments and make decisions to ensure that the local system of assessments is comprehensive and balanced, assessment leaders engage with all the stakeholders who rely on assessment information to make decisions about teaching and learning.

- » **Foster authentic stakeholder engagement:** A comprehensive, balanced assessment system must provide all stakeholders with the information they need to make decisions about student learning; therefore, assessment leaders must engage stakeholders to provide informed feedback about different assessment tools and processes as well as about the assessment system as a whole. Assessment leaders are able to articulate a strong vision and offer appropriate background knowledge to stakeholders, while also bringing a learning orientation to stakeholder engagement that ensures stakeholder experiences are central to any decision about the system of assessments (Sigman & Mancuso, 2017).
- » **Develop a complete picture:** Assessment leaders need to have a complete picture of current assessment practices in their system. Developing this picture requires a detailed understanding of the purposes, context, and

current use of data for each assessment tool administered in the system and how each is currently being used to inform teaching and learning. It also requires an understanding of how these assessments work together in the context of the overall assessment system. Additionally, this complete picture should include an understanding of current formative assessment practices and which assessment processes are happening in classrooms during instruction. Such a complete picture is only possible with information provided by key stakeholders such as administrators, teachers, students, and parents (Cizek, 1995).

- » **Evaluate assessments:** Assessment leaders use their knowledge of fundamental assessment concepts, including the criteria for high-quality assessments, and collaborate with stakeholders to evaluate and make decisions about assessments. They evaluate purposes, quality, value, and appropriate use of individual assessment tools, and they analyze their current system to identify and make decisions regarding gaps and redundancies based on the needs of all stakeholders to make choices about teaching and learning.
- » **Evaluate formative assessment practice:** Assessment leaders observe and evaluate classroom formative assessment practices to identify the strategies and supports necessary to sustain and improve the ways which formative assessment informs instruction and improves learning for all students.
- » **Make adjustments to assessment system:** Based on the collaborative analysis of individual assessments and assessment practices, assessment leaders make appropriate changes to the current assessment system

to ensure balance, alignment, and utility in order to improve learning. Leaders must take responsibility for addressing gaps in the assessment system and must be actively involved in eliminating assessments that are not aligned, are redundant, or aren't useful in making decisions about teaching and learning that allow students to meet their learning goals (Cizek, 1995).

3. Develop and implement a culture of assessment literacy in which a comprehensive, balanced system of assessment aligns to local equity goals

Engaging with stakeholders to establish a system of assessments that is comprehensive and balanced is essential but is not enough to produce equitable learning outcomes. One study found that while more than 90 percent of teachers in the study indicated they use data to adjust instruction, nearly 30 percent reported that they do not feel prepared to interpret the results of their assessments (Jackson et al., 2017). This finding suggests that teachers and other leaders need ongoing support to connect assessment evidence to quality instructional practice. Assessment leaders must establish a culture of assessment literacy and the structural conditions — such as common meeting times and data analysis routines — required to effectively and appropriately use high-quality assessment data to achieve equitable learning outcomes.

- » **Build a common vision and language:** Assessment leaders build a common vision and language by offering professional learning focused on assessment and data literacy, including formative assessment practice. They also place value on the assessment tools and processes that produce the kinds of

evidence of student learning most useful to teachers and students. They support teachers in building knowledge that allows the teachers to effectively examine student data and use it to make good decisions about instruction for increasing student achievement of their learning goals.

- » **Ensure appropriate use of data:** Assessment leaders take responsibility for what is done with the data produced by assessment tools and processes. This responsibility involves providing professional learning to other leaders, teachers, students, and parents about how to interpret and make appropriate use of assessment data, and involves creating the necessary structural conditions. Structures that enable educators to analyze, reflect on, collaborate around, and plan using assessment data might include common meeting times, data analysis routines that support application to classroom practice, and classroom observations with meaningful feedback for teachers.
- » **Promote ongoing stakeholder engagement:** Assessment leaders invest in ongoing improvement of the comprehensive, balanced assessment system and a culture of assessment literacy. They establish and maintain processes necessary for understanding and responding to the needs and concerns of key stakeholders, including teachers, students, and parents, and they develop strategies for ongoing authentic engagement of stakeholders to inform decisions about the assessment system.

Where to Begin

Assuming responsibility for assessment leadership can be daunting, especially considering the many pressing responsibilities on leaders' plates. However, effective assessment leadership can bring many of the demands related to teaching and learning into focus and provide clarity on the appropriate next steps for improving student learning outcomes (Noonan & Renihan, 2006). Noonan and Renihan make the stakes clear: "[P]rincipals who ignore assessment reform and its leadership implications do so at the peril" of the students whose learning they are responsible for (p. 13). However, assessment leadership is not a solitary effort, and effective leaders need to develop and sustain distributed leadership to enact a comprehensive, balanced assessment system and a culture of assessment literacy (Cizek, 1995; Noonan & Renihan, 2006).

As a first step, assessment leaders should acquire knowledge of fundamental assessment literacy concepts and support the professional learning of other decision-makers at all levels of the system. This step includes developing the capacity to apply knowledge to practice, including engaging stakeholders in dialog about assessment tools, practices, and beliefs (Cizek, 1995; Noonan & Renihan, 2006).

Second, assessment leaders should begin to establish structures that support distributed assessment leadership. Cizek (1995) suggests establishing an assessment advisory committee to help assemble a complete picture of current assessment practices

as a foundation for ongoing efforts to ensure a comprehensive, balanced assessment system and culture of assessment literacy. He recommends recruiting participants who represent the full range of stakeholders that rely on assessment data to make decisions about student learning. Participants could include administrators who make decisions about instructional evaluation and about accountability and monitoring, and teachers to represent decisions about classroom practices. Additionally, staff who use data for counseling and supporting student development, as well as students and parents, should be represented.

Such a committee requires a structured process for gathering information about the assessment tools and practices currently in place, evaluating current assessment tools and practices, and making recommendations about changes to the current assessment system to ensure that it is comprehensive and balanced.

This committee process can serve as a stepping-stone to establishing a comprehensive, balanced system of assessment and building the culture of assessment literacy necessary for using assessment data to achieve improved, equitable student learning outcomes. Assessment leaders could leverage a committee for ongoing distributed leadership that establishes and promotes a vision for assessment, discourages inappropriate uses of assessment data, and supports improved use of data.

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