Key Characteristics of a Coherent and Effective Local Assessment System

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Each assessment tool (such as a test or task) and practice (such as engaging in an academic dialogue in class) is designed to elicit evidence of student learning for a specific purpose. This purpose might be to inform immediate next steps in learning for an individual student or to gain a better understanding of how well a program is supporting a group of students. No matter the purpose, every assessment activity should be used to make decisions that can improve learning for students.

We often consider each different assessment tool and practice individually. However, school and district leaders who are interested in using assessment to support all students in meeting their learning goals must consider how all these assessments work together to create a coherent local assessment system.

Often when we think of assessment, we immediately think about state summative assessments linked to state accountability systems. These state assessments play an important role in monitoring how well schools and districts across a state are serving the needs of all learners. However, these assessment tools are not intended to provide classroom-level instructional information or guide the learning of individual students. Additionally, because they are designed to provide comparable information across schools and districts in a state, local leaders are afforded little choice when it comes to the tests that make up a state assessment system. These assessments are not likely to align with all the values, priorities, and agreements about what learning should look like that guide local decisions about teaching and learning.

Local leaders have agency over the way that evidence of student learning is understood and responded to in a local assessment system. A local assessment system can be a powerful tool to improve learning outcomes for all students, but only when leaders support the intentional design of a system that is both coherent and effective. Such a system is predicated upon a compelling, shared vision for teaching and learning that serves as a North Star for all important decisions about teaching and learning, including choices about the assessment system. This vision can represent commonly held agreements about valued learning goals, how students experience learning, and what it looks like for students to demonstrate mastery.

States and local leaders who want to ensure that local assessment systems provide the most meaningful information to support classroom learning and local improvement goals can invest in building the capacity to enact and sustain local assessment systems that are coherent and effective. Leaders can partner with their communities to design and sustain coherence and effectiveness by focusing on enacting an assessment system that includes the following **key characteristics** (Figure 1) through the selection and design of specific assessment tools and practices, assessment administration and practice, use of assessment data, and communication and collaboration with educational partners.

The following pages examine what each of these key characteristics looks like in practice and why it is important in assessment systems that can help ensure all students meet their learning goals.

Figure 1. Key Characteristics of a Coherent and Effective Local Assessment System
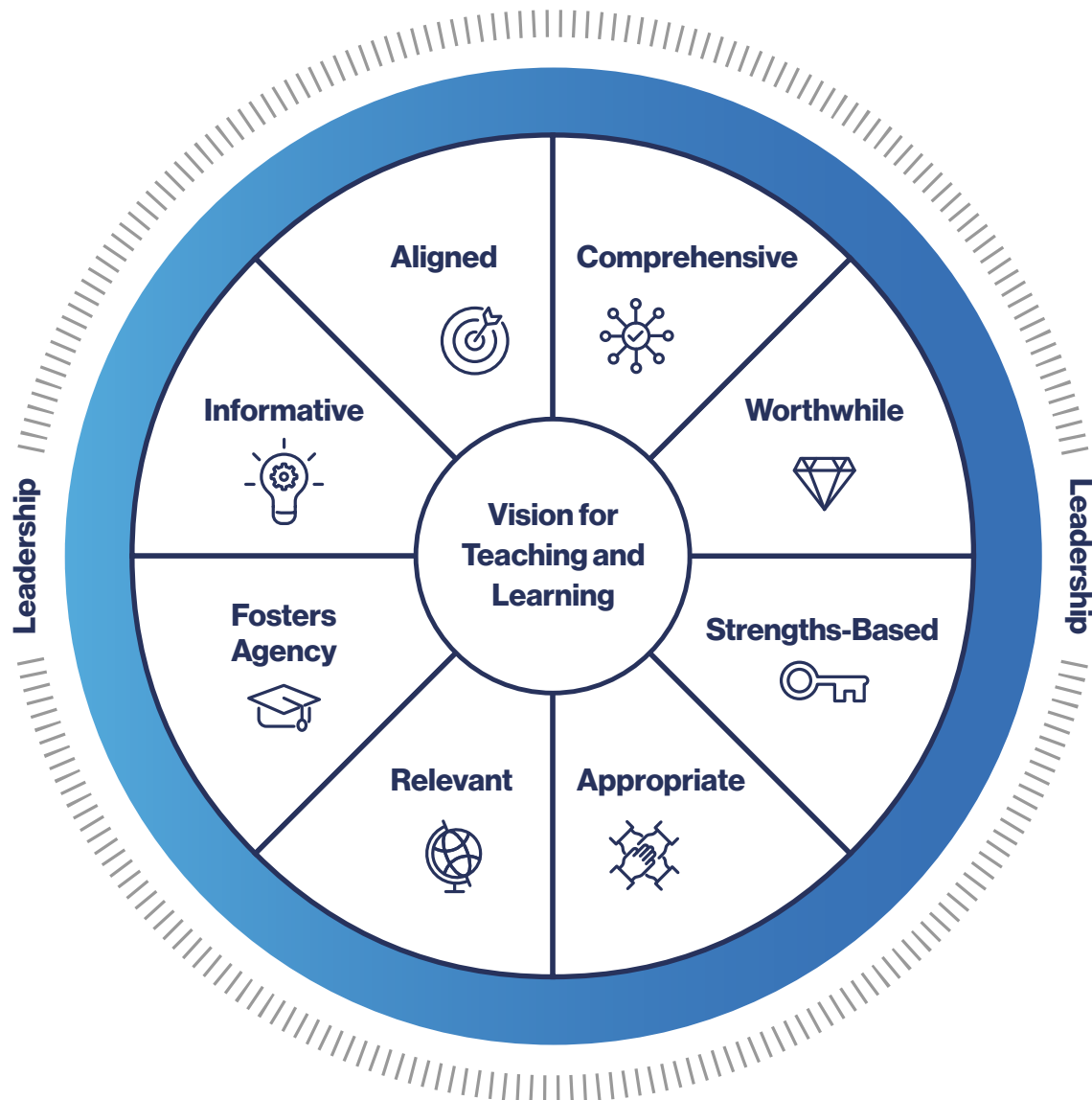
Coherent and Effective

Informative

An assessment system is **INFORMATIVE** when

- assessment is used efficiently, ensuring that any assessment experience is used to inform teaching, learning, and system improvement;

- assessment tools and practices are of high quality, yielding meaningful information about learning that education partners can rely on to make decisions;

- redundant, misaligned, and underutilized assessments are eliminated; and

- all education partners (teachers, leaders, students, families) have access to timely, useable information about student learning that they need to make informed decisions about education at their levels.

Vignette: A Less Informative Assessment System

A district requires all K–8 students to participate in a standardized reading assessment and a math interim assessment every 6 weeks. The resulting reports provided to teachers and families consist of a raw score and a percentile score. Without any context about standards, student learning, or guidance about next steps in learning, the reports are either ignored or used simply to confirm assumptions about which students are "getting" the content being taught and which are not.

Vignette: A More Informative Assessment System

A district conducts an annual survey of teachers, students, and parents to elicit feedback about the value of the assessment data they receive throughout the year and how specifically these data are and are not used. The district uses this information to guide decisions about specific assessments, including whether to continue using them and what sort of training and resources they can provide to help teachers and others understand and use the assessment data.

Reflection Questions

- The approach in the first vignette can cause harm to students by diverting valuable instructional time and resources toward an assessment experience that does not contribute to teaching or learning and that reinforces assumptions about student potential. What additional consequences might be caused by this approach?

- In what ways is the assessment approach in the second vignette more informative?

- How informative is your assessment system? What might make it more informative?

Coherent and Effective

Aligned

An assessment system is **ALIGNED** when

- academic assessments are in alignment with standards, curricula, and instruction;

- assessments elicit evidence of student learning in ways that are consistent with shared agreements about how students learn the subject matter and what it looks like for students to demonstrate mastery; and

- assessment opportunities are consistent with the ways in which students have opportunities to learn the content.

Vignette: A Less Aligned Assessment System

In response to dissatisfaction with elementary school reading results, a district added several different assessments to track progress toward success on the state tests. The district also purchased additional tests to be used as literacy screeners and to monitor progress for response to intervention (RTI). These tools were not screened for their connection to the standards. Over time, as reading results have not made a significant shift, new assessments have been added, duplicating the purpose of some assessments already in use.

Vignette: A More Aligned Assessment System

Administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community leaders came together to thoughtfully discuss what information they needed about students to make effective decisions at every level. These discussions specifically addressed how different assessments connect to the standards, districtwide agreements about teaching and learning, and the intended purpose for each assessment tool and practice. They selected assessments that provide the necessary information efficiently and reliably. They trained staff on which assessments to use and why, how to administer them, and how to use the results. There is a common language about assessment in the district, and everyone openly and honestly discusses what is working and what is not.

Reflection Questions

- The approach to assessment in the first vignette can cause harm to students by creating confusion about the purpose of each assessment and how the data are supposed to be used to improve teaching and learning. This approach can also frustrate students, parents, and teachers about the amount of instructional time, energy, and money that is invested in testing without any clear value to student learning. What additional consequences might be caused by this approach?

- In what ways is the assessment system in the second vignette more aligned?

- How well-aligned is your assessment system? What might make it more aligned?

Coherent and Effective

Comprehensive

An assessment system is **COMPREHENSIVE** when

- data from multiple measures are used to create a more complete picture of student learning over time;

- assessment tools and practices are used for the purposes for which they were designed; and

- quantitative and qualitative data, including data provided by students and families, are used to support educational decision-making at all levels.

Vignette: A Less Comprehensive Assessment System

At the beginning of the year, each grade-level professional learning group (PLG) is required to review state summative assessment data and use that information to set a specific SMART goal, measurable by state summative test results at the end of the upcoming school year. Teachers use their analysis of state summative assessment data to plan instruction for the year, prioritizing instruction on key areas related to their identified test score goals.

Vignette: A More Comprehensive Assessment System

Teacher teams meet at the end of the school year for a "data reflection and planning summit." In addition to standardized assessment data, each teacher completes student and family empathy interviews and brings notes from PLG meetings, coaching sessions, and student feedback journals that capture patterns in student feedback on significant work products. Teacher teams look for patterns in their classroom data and discuss how they do or do not correspond with the patterns in standardized summative and interim assessment data. They use their discussion to set PLG goals and strategies for the upcoming school year.

Reflection Questions

- The approach in the first vignette could cause harm to students by asking teachers to make consequential decisions about instruction based on the single data point of standardized summative assessments without considering students' learning experiences, strengths, and interests. This approach narrows the curriculum and overemphasizes identified areas at the expense of other valued learning. What additional consequences might be caused by this approach?

- In what ways is the assessment approach in the second vignette more comprehensive?

- How comprehensive is your assessment system? What might make it more comprehensive?

Coherent and Effective

Worthwhile

An assessment system is **WORTHWHILE** when

- assessment tools and strategies prioritize improving student learning over simply producing data;

- educators prioritize improving systems over accountability and compliance when using assessment results; and

- students are provided regular feedback about their learning in ways that help them understand where they are in relation to shared learning goals, and they are provided guidance about their own next steps in learning.

Vignette: A Less Worthwhile Assessment System

A district purchases a suite of interim assessments with the expectation that teachers in PLGs will utilize the detailed, flexible data analytics and the linked instructional intervention tools to provide targeted support to groups and individual students. However, teachers report that these assessments are not reflective of the local curriculum or the inquiry-based learning model adopted at the elementary level. Teachers also convey that while the data reports provide information that allows teachers to sort students into categories, they do not provide guidance about how to support student learning within the district's curricular framework.

Vignette: A More Worthwhile Assessment System

Student writing assignments are structured with ongoing opportunities to make work public and to engage in self-feedback and peer feedback guided by clear, standards-based success criteria. Students engage in an iterative writing process and are supported by teachers to set their own goals for next steps in their writing.

Reflection Questions

- The approach in the first vignette could cause harm to students by testing students on content they have not yet had the opportunity to learn and in ways that are inconsistent with their learning. These assessments could yield misleading data about student learning and results that cannot be readily linked to improved learning experiences for students. What additional consequences might be caused by this approach?

- In what ways is the assessment approach in the second vignette worthwhile?

- How well does your assessment system advance learning? What might make it more worthwhile?

Coherent and Effective

Strengths-Based

An assessment system is **STRENGTHS-BASED** when students engage in assessment opportunities that

- help identify and build on student strengths rather than focusing only on deficits or areas of weakness and

- value students' language, culture, and experiences and invite them to draw on this knowledge when sharing what they know and can do.

Vignette: A More Deficit-Based Assessment System

Report cards and parent–teacher conferences are used primarily as opportunities to communicate to families about gaps in student learning that are surfaced by classroom and standardized assessments. Families are given a note-taking tool that asks them to write down "where my student needs to improve" and corresponding information about "strategies to try at home." Families leave with handouts about specific strategies to help close the gap in their students' learning.

Vignette: A More Strengths-Based Assessment System

Students are supported to select examples of their work that they find reflective of their learning to share with their teachers and families in parent–teacher conferences. Students are provided scaffolds (such as sentence frames) to highlight their strengths, progress, interests, and next steps in their learning. Families are invited to share observations about their children's learning. Where relevant, teachers supplement each student's self-assessment with additional data about learning to support the student and their family in understanding their learning.

Reflection Questions

- The approach in the first vignette could cause harm to students by framing learning around students' deficits and by ignoring students' strengths. This approach can demoralize students and turn them off of learning. What additional consequences might be caused by this approach?

- In what ways is the assessment approach in the second vignette more focused on students' assets?

- How strengths-based is your assessment system? What might make it more strengths-based?

Coherent and Effective

Appropriate for All Learners

An assessment system is **APPROPRIATE** when

- all assessment tools and strategies are made accessible for all learners,

- a range of appropriate levels of challenge and cognitive demand are provided for each student, and

- students have access to appropriate language and learning supports during instruction and assessment.

Vignette: An Assessment System That Is Less Appropriate for All Learners

The district's assessment policy states the following: "Because of concerns related to the validity of the construct being assessed, district policy prohibits any supports or accommodations on local assessments beyond those required explicitly in an individualized education plan (IEP) or 504 plan."

Vignette: An Assessment System That Is More Appropriate for All Learners

Teachers identify appropriate supports for students during instruction and ensure that students have access to appropriate supports during classroom and standardized assessment experiences. Teachers are familiar with the universal tools, designated supports, and accommodations that are available to students on standardized assessments. Teachers provide students the opportunity to understand and practice using accessibility features, and students are given the opportunity to provide feedback about which features were helpful to them. Teachers work with assessment coordinators to ensure that any designated supports are available to students who need them.

Reflection Questions

- The approach to assessment in the first vignette could cause harm to students because assessment data may be inaccurate when students face unnecessary barriers to showing what they know and can do. Accordingly, students may experience assessments that are unnecessarily difficult and demoralizing. What additional consequences might be caused by this approach?

- In what ways is the assessment approach in the second vignette more appropriate for all learners?

- How appropriate for all learners is your assessment system? What might make it more so?

Coherent and Effective

Relevant

An assessment system is **RELEVANT** when students engage in assessment opportunities that

- are meaningful and engaging to students and
- allow for different approaches (e.g., giving students different options for demonstrating their knowledge, such as verbal, written, or drawn responses).

Vignette: A Less Relevant Assessment System

After reviewing data that indicated a high degree of variability in the grades that teachers gave, a social studies department adopted a policy aimed at ensuring more comparability of grades across teachers and classes. In each social studies class, grades must be derived from the same set of assignments, including multiple-choice unit tests, predetermined research papers graded with a common rubric, and homework assignments from the curriculum. None of these graded assessments allow for student inquiry, student choice, or connection to students' personal, family, and community interests and experiences.

Vignette: A More Relevant Assessment System

A social studies department adopts an inquiry-based, student-designed culminating research project for each course, using grade-appropriate disciplinary strategies for conducting research and communicating learning. Students are provided clear, standards-based success criteria that require them to apply their previous learning in the course. The capstone project is scaffolded over a period of weeks. Students have the opportunity to identify a topic of interest with personal relevance, design their project, select a presentation strategy to share their learning, and give and receive feedback from their peers and their teacher throughout the process.

Reflection Questions

- The approach in the first vignette could cause harm to students by evaluating student learning based on less important skills in the discipline. This approach could elicit inaccurate information about student learning because it relates to material that is likely not personally engaging to students, and so the assessment data are likely not an accurate measure of students' disciplinary knowledge, skills, abilities, and assets. What additional consequences might be caused by this approach?
- In what ways is the assessment approach in the second vignette more relevant?
- How relevant is your assessment system? What could make it more relevant?

Coherent and Effective

Fosters Agency

An assessment system **FOSTERS AGENCY** when

- formative assessment practices that encourage students to develop agency over their own learning are prioritized and supported,

- the system includes student-centered assessment tools and practices that invite student choice, and

- students are empowered to engage with data about their own learning and reflect on implications for next steps with their teachers and families.

Vignette: An Assessment System That Is Less Supportive of Student Agency

A district has adopted a pacing guide with predetermined daily "formative assessment checks." Teachers are expected to draw on a prescriptive set of "differentiation strategies" to provide additional student support based on responses to the formative assessment checks. Administrators observe classrooms and provide monthly data to the district about fidelity to the pacing guide.

Vignette: An Assessment System That Is More Supportive of Student Agency

District leaders provide a clear vision for formative assessment that prioritizes student agency as a key outcome. The district invests in implementation of the formative assessment process by providing ongoing professional learning, time, and facilitation support in PLGs and job-embedded coaching to deepen their formative assessment practice. Administrators provide both universal and targeted support for the PLGs and direct resources to support teachers and students who need additional help.

Reflection Questions

- The approach in the first vignette could cause harm to students by ignoring the essential information that students and teachers have about learning and by creating a culture that devalues students' and teachers' expertise. This approach could also lead to implementing instructional responses that may not be appropriate for specific students. What additional consequences might be caused by this approach?

- In what ways is the assessment approach in the second vignette more supportive of student agency?

- How supportive of student agency is your assessment system? What could make it more supportive of student agency?