



Ten ASSESSMENT LITERACY GOALS for SCHOOL LEADERS

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Overview



In 2016 Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act to replace the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, perhaps best known for placing high-stakes importance for both schools and students on the results of a single test. Even though it is now five years removed, NCLB and the requirement for schools to make adequate yearly progress influenced assessment in American schools in ways that have not been fully realized or successfully managed yet today.

NCLB triggered the adoption of new levels of testing in schools and districts, most of them voluntary. Test publishers and software companies saw the movement and pursued the profit, trying to capitalize on anything remotely “formative.” The K–12 market filled with options for benchmark, interim, short-cycle, and common assessments. But whatever the test was called, whether purchased off the shelf or developed in-house, a standardized test or a home-grown common assessment, built from an item bank, taken online or with paper and pencil, schools and districts raced to generate the data they believed they needed to help them get to adequate yearly progress. Given the stakes, it’s little surprise that schools did what was thought necessary to discover if they were or were not on the road to the levels of achievement required.

Along the way, many schools discovered gaps in what was taught and what was tested, and had to grapple with why and what to do about it. Others discovered that the results of any assessment are only as good as the quality of the assessment itself. And they found that multiple measures don’t help without first attending to the conditions that need to be in place for all assessments to produce accurate results. The move to new levels of interim assessment happened so quickly that many schools had difficulty laying the foundation of assessment literacy required to make it all work. For some it was trial and error: some testing issues were unforeseen and managed, while others went either unnoticed or unaddressed. Teachers and schools became overloaded with data and were mostly unprepared to use the results in ways that help students learn. And in the classroom, two competing forces became more apparent than ever: the use of instructional time spent preparing students for tests external to the classroom that largely measured what was practical to test in a large-scale format seemed in conflict with the commitment to teach a well-rounded, rich curriculum (Au, 2007). Across all levels of education (states, districts, schools, and classrooms), assessment balance became difficult to achieve.

The Assessment Literacy and School Leadership Connection

As authors, our primary interest in writing this book comes from the ongoing need we see to promote and strengthen assessment literacy in educators at all levels. NCLB's side effects may have helped put a spotlight on the need for assessment literacy, but that need was always there, and it persists today.

We see fundamental assessment literacy as part of the complex equation of what makes an effective teacher. The role of the principal is largely in providing direction and exercising influence (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). Some scholars believe that the concept of "instructional leadership" has remained vague and undefined. However, we assume that it entails the principal taking responsibility for the programs of curriculum, instruction, and assessment in the school. It follows then that, in respect to establishing assessment literacy, responsibility rests with school leaders to provide opportunities for teachers to learn to become assessment literate, and to support them in the classroom as they transfer what they have learned into everyday instruction. For that to happen, school and district leaders must also be assessment literate. For many, that means continuing to learn while on the job, an activity that most principals are happy to engage in and model for others.

Assessment Literacy

What does it mean to be assessment literate? In the box below is the definition (Chappuis & Stiggins, 2020) we promote when discussing assessment literacy.

Assessment literacy is having the knowledge and skills needed to gather accurate information about student achievement and use the assessment process and its results to effectively improve achievement.

The shortcut we've used as a reminder of the definition's two big ideas is "doing it right and using it well," and it can be applied to assessments of all types and for all purposes, formative and summative, criterion and norm referenced, and in all grade levels and subject areas.

Because students experience the vast majority of assessments as part of daily classroom instruction, our emphasis in this book tilts in the direction of classroom assessment literacy. In large part our reasoning is that improved learning through the use of assessment has been shown at the classroom level, where the rewards of formative assessment are greatest. Ideally, all preservice preparation for teachers would include coursework in assessment literacy, and in-service professional development would build on that. But that is not yet the case, and the longer it is not the case, the more problematic some of the omissions in teacher preparation become. Those omissions end up becoming issues that can often confront and confound building administrators. For principals who are not assessment literate, the resolution to such issues is harder to find, as exemplified below.

Poorly constructed assessments mismeasure student learning and exacerbate inequity. The link between instruction and assessment is as strong, or should be, as the link between the written curriculum and instruction. Like curriculum and instruction, assessment can be done either well or poorly. Done well, it measures student learning accurately and results can be used to promote further learning. Done poorly, students are indeed harmed. For example, a faulty test score from a poorly constructed summative test leads to a faulty final grade. Similarly, a faulty formative assessment can lead to inappropriate feedback to students and errors in what comes next in instruction. For some students the desire to learn is linked to learning success; if success is undermined by poor assessment, we put at risk the entire notion of “incentive to learn.” Imagine students saying, “There were too many trick questions on the test” or “That test had nothing to do with what was in the book and homework,” or the most common catch-all, “That test was grossly unfair!” If such familiar complaints are too often blown off as “kids being kids,” it is a sign of assessment literacy work yet to be done.

Assessment practices in general do not yet meet student information needs. An assessment-literate educator knows how to involve students in the process of gathering and using assessment information so they develop the habit of self-assessing and learn to adjust their strategies and efforts as needed to gain success. For some teachers and principals the concept of students being at the front of the line of all of the many users of assessment information is novel and even hard to grasp. But the notion of student engagement in the lesson is an instructional strategy with research to back it up, and principals are often on the lookout for it as they observe them in classrooms. Involving students in the assessment process is a logical extension of a strategy that many teachers already employ. Research suggests that students who understand the characteristics of good work and learn how to use those characteristics for their own self-assessment experience learning gains. But it also suggests that continuing, on-the-job professional development is needed for teachers to establish their formative classroom practices (Educational Testing Service, 2018).

Unsound grading practices harm both learners and learning. Grading is both an information delivery tool and a process. But as with other functions in schooling we’ve previously noted, grading can be done well or done poorly. Even though sometimes difficult to distill, if assigned properly, test and report card grades can relay the status of student learning in relation to the goals of instruction, in real time or aggregated over time. If grading is done poorly, the quality of the information is at best uneven, and students can’t get out of the way of what essentially becomes inaccurate information about their learning. When variables that have nothing to do with how well students have learned, such as attendance, effort, and attitude, are allowed to enter the grading process, the need for assessment literacy becomes clear.

Assessments in many schools and districts are disjointed, occurring in isolation instead of as a part of a comprehensive and balanced assessment system. We will explore balanced assessment systems more in Chapter 1, but it is important to note at the outset that assessment literacy for all staff is more likely to take hold and thrive when all assessments are

viewed as a part of a larger system of assessments, each with a clearly defined purpose and role. And each assessment in such a system is based on what has been or will be taught vis-à-vis the established learning goals, meaning that the space between curriculum, instruction, and assessment is undetectable. More than ever, we need to be prepared to answer the question “Why does my child have to take this test?” or “What exactly does this test measure?” In a balanced system the answers to these questions are readily available and are communicated to all, with the principal playing the point guard in the distribution of information.

School Leadership, Instruction, and Assessment

Evidence continues to show the connection between student learning and effective leadership from the building principal, and leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). This body of research helps explain why leadership knowledge and skills specific to the area of classroom assessment are beneficial. The principal can ensure that assessments in the building and from outside the building are of high quality and, in the same vein, can call into question long-standing assessment practices that can adversely affect learning and learners. Assessment-literate principals can advocate for student involvement in the assessment process, provide high-quality feedback to teachers on their assessment practices, and encourage teachers to see the use of data as an opportunity to investigate causes and generate solutions rather than just calling out another problem.

Ten Assessment Literacy Goals for School Leaders

The vehicle we use in this book to link assessment literacy with school leadership is a set of 10 goals (see Table 1), all of which when acted on can contribute to individual and/or systemic assessment literacy. Each assessment literacy goal is focused on a main concept, bolded in the list in Table 1. We found it useful to pull these concepts out into their own list, where they can act as reminders of the big picture of each goal and the work ahead. Each of the next 10 chapter titles are drawn from this list.

1. Comprehensive and balanced assessment systems
2. Clear academic achievement targets
3. Standards of assessment quality
4. Formative assessment practices
5. Sound grading practices
6. Effective communication
7. Ethical and appropriate assessment use
8. Teacher evaluation and professional development
9. Analysis of student assessment information
10. Sound assessment-related policies

TABLE 1 Ten assessment literacy goals for school leaders

1. The leader understands the attributes of a **comprehensive and balanced assessment system** that includes large-scale assessment, school- or district-level assessment, and classroom-level summative and formative assessment, ensuring multiple measures of all valued learning goals.
2. The leader understands the necessity of **clear academic achievement goals**, aligned classroom-level learning targets, and success criteria used by students and teachers, and their relationship to the development of sound assessments.
3. The leader understands the **standards of quality** for student assessment and ensures that these standards are met in all school/district assessments.
4. The leader understands **formative assessment practices** and works with staff to integrate student-centered assessment for learning into classroom instruction.
5. The leader understands **sound grading practices** and works with staff to ensure that all students receive meaningful, accurate grades.
6. The leader **communicates effectively** with all members of the school community about student assessment.
7. The leader understands the conditions required for the **ethical and appropriate use of student assessment** and protects students and staff from potential misuse.
8. The leader **evaluates** teachers' classroom assessment competencies and uses that information to present and/or secure **appropriate professional development**.
9. The leader **analyzes student assessment information** accurately, uses that information to improve curriculum and instruction, and assists teachers in doing the same.
10. The leader develops and implements **sound assessment and assessment-related policies**.

The 10 assessment literacy goals serve as a guide for school leaders who wish to improve their own assessment literacy. In doing so, leaders will see how assessment can be used to improve student learning, and the steps they can take in their own system to help bring that about. The goals are intended for individual, group, or organizational use. Working with one or all of the goals at any level will help educators gain assessment literacy and, by doing so, influence the assessment literacy in the system where they work. The 10 assessment literacy goals can also be used for work at the systems level in the following ways:

- As a resource in planning and implementing a comprehensive and balanced system of assessments
- To inform assessment criteria for principal evaluation frameworks
- To clarify personal goal setting for formative principal evaluation systems
- To inform teacher evaluation criteria, observation, and feedback
- To inform school improvement planning and organizational goal setting
- As a resource for professional development: individual, small/large group, face-to-face presentation, online course, and so on

Looking Ahead

Each of the 10 chapters that follow will explore one of the assessment literacy goals in some depth. For each goal you'll find the following:

- Chapter learning goals
- Text that explains the goal: its relevance, applicable research, and leadership responsibilities
- Success indicators for the goal, describing what knowledge and actions look like when the goal is attained
- Personal portfolio entry suggestions
- Study guide questions
- Definitions of key terms, with each term appearing in bold the first time it occurs in the chapter
- Activities and resources to assist with understanding, implementation, and self-analysis of goal attainment.

The appendix provides ideas on how to use the book content and features in a professional development setting, as well as in a learning team model of study. It also connects each learning goal with features of the text. The appendix also includes a table that matches chapter learning goals to success indicators, activities, and study guide questions.

School and/or District Administrator Focus

As noted earlier, because of research focused on the effects of formative assessment in the classroom, and because of the positive impact school principals can have on school effectiveness and student learning, this book is focused primarily on the role of building administrators. The 10 goals, however, easily cross over from building to district administrators, and what the district administrator can do to operationalize a goal is often similar to what a school leader must do.

Resources Consulted

While our collective experience in teaching educators the principles of sound assessment aided as a resource for this book, we also reviewed some of the most recent instructional frameworks for teachers as well as professional standards for school administrators, with an eye toward what each contained regarding assessment knowledge and skills. Some were practically void on the topic. Listed below are those that we found most useful to help frame the 10 assessment literacy goals and also inform the indicators of success for each:

- *Assessment Literacy Standards*, Michigan Assessment Consortium
- *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders*, National Policy Board for Educational Administration
- *Evaluating School Principals: A Legislative Approach*, National Conference of State Legislatures
- *5D+ Rubric for Instructional Growth and Teacher Evaluation*, Center for Educational Renewal, University of Washington
- *Comprehensive and Balanced Assessment Systems*, National Panel on the Future of Assessment Practices, Learning Sciences Institute
- *Teacher/Principal Evaluation Program*, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Washington