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## Assessment for Truly Effective Schools Requires Local School District Leadership

*Management is doing things right. Leadership is doing the right thing.*

Peter Drucker

The time has come to bring educational assessment into the twenty-first century. Three practical changes can accomplish that but only if they are made at local district, school, and classroom levels. To be sure, state and federal education leaders can support local leaders by providing policy encouragement and resources, but only local school leaders and their faculties, in collaboration with their communities, can achieve the essential transformations. Here's how:

1. Historically, assessment has been seen only as a tool for judging the sufficiency of learning and for holding learners accountable. In the future, *teachers must also use assessment in their classrooms to help students learn*. This must become a priority.

2. It is time to abandon the belief that intimidation can work as a universal motivator; it has never worked well and never will. *Learning success is the only viable universal motivator* and we must help teachers understand effective ways to use this motivator in their classrooms.
3. The *quality of our assessments must improve* at all levels.

### **LOCAL PRIORITY #1: USE “ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING” TO PROMOTE ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

Our traditional educational model held that teachers know and teach, as students listen and learn—or not. Teachers test to find out who mastered the material and who did not, record the results, dole out the rewards or punishments, and then move on to the next lesson. Essentially, adults control the classroom and students are receptacles. Those students who master the material early on can then build on that foundation to achieve further success. Students who miss the early learning continue to struggle as the instructional system marches on—leaving them farther and farther behind. According to this traditional model, assessment is something adults do to students because their assessment job is judge and grade the sufficiency of each student’s learning.

In the 1990s, a small team of us working around the world began to ask, what if we made students more active players in monitoring their own learning success? What if we taught them the skills of self-evaluation so they could partner with their teachers in monitoring and regulating their own learning? What if assessment became something done *with* students, not merely to them? Would they then learn more?

What we have discovered is that self-evaluation is not only a strong confidence builder, motivator, and facilitator of learning, but it is also at the heart of academic competence in every school subject. Let me illustrate.

Below is a brief text passage taken from an exercise in Gillet and Tangle (1986). See if you can figure out what it’s about.

For some it is highly unsettling to come into close contact with them. It is far worse to gain control over and deliberately

inflict pain on them. The revulsion caused by this punishment is so strong that many will not take part in it at all. But there is one group of people who seem to revel in the contact and the punishment, as well as the rewards associated with both. Members of this group share modes of dress, talk and deportment. Then there is another group of people who shun the whole enterprise—contact, punishment and rewards alike. Members of this group are as varied as all humanity. But there also is a third group not previously mentioned for whose sake attention in this activity is undertaken. They too harm their victims, though they do so without intention of cruelty. They simply follow their own necessities. Theirs is the cruelest punishment of all. Sometimes, but not always, they themselves suffer as a result. (Gillet & Temple, 1986)

Almost everyone struggles with this reading task. The reason comprehension evades us in this case is that all of the proper nouns have been removed and only pronouns remain with no referents. This blocks comprehension. Here's why: In recent years, reading specialists have helped us understand the cognitive processes of reading comprehension more clearly. In order to comprehend a passage such as this, the reader must bring two things to the table: appropriate prior knowledge and a sufficiently well-developed text processing or decoding capability to mentally lift the author's meaning from the page.

With respect to prior knowledge, it can be said that we each carry in our brains personal mental copies of the world as we understand it, given our prior experiences and learning—our “schema” or “schemata.”

As we read, we instantly and automatically (particularly as proficient readers) decode the words and sentences—the language—in order to draw the author's message from the page and we relate it to our schema in order to compare the two. When we read for learning, we continuously decide when and how to change our schema according to the lessons presented by our “teacher/author.” When we read for pleasure, comprehension becomes a process of relying on our schema to visualize the story unfolding in our minds.

If the author has assumed that the reader possesses particular knowledge that the reader in fact does *not* possess, or if the text is written in an unfamiliar language, then no integration is possible,

and there will be no comprehension. This is why, for many of us, reading a book on nuclear physics does not result in comprehension. We lack the proper knowledge base, including knowledge of vocabulary needed to make sense of the author's message.

Now let's return to that mysterious passage. Chances are, like most adult readers, you could process the sentences in a mechanical sort of way. There probably were no words or constructions that you had not seen before, yet despite that, the passage made no sense. Why? Without proper nouns, you had no links to the appropriate structure of prior knowledge (schema). In fact, you know what you need to know to figure out what the passage is about, and I am about to give you the link that will connect you to your schema. When I do, you will comprehend the meaning contained in every sentence.

But first, I want to make the essential point of this illustration. A few minutes ago when you were reading the passage, you probably began to realize pretty quickly that you were not understanding it, and when you realized that, you probably began to change reading strategies. Most common is re-reading. Some people just try to read more slowly. Still others try to plug in trial topics to see if that brings the meaning to the fore. In any case, *you kept monitoring your own comprehension to see if your new strategy was working any better than the old one*. The fact that you did so in the face of not comprehending represents compelling evidence that you have made yourself into an independently functioning adult reader. When confronted with a lack of understanding that *you detected on your own*, you went into problem solver mode to try to find a pathway to meaning.

What prompted your change of strategy? Your automatically triggered skill of self-assessment. You were monitoring your own comprehension and, when you determined you were not understanding the material, you began to change strategies. Assessment of one's own comprehension resides at the very heart of reading proficiency. Any student (indeed, any person) who cannot evaluate his or her own comprehension and respond strategically based on the results of that evaluation cannot become an independently functioning adult reader.

Each teacher's job is to turn over to her or his students the keys to the reading kingdom—to bring students to a place where they no longer need the teacher to give them a reading comprehension test to find out if they got it. We must bring students to a

point where they can determine for themselves whether they are understanding and decide what to do about it when they are not.

Consider this same idea applied to the development of writing proficiency. A student who cannot monitor the quality of his or her own writing and revise it when it isn't "working" has not yet become an independently functioning writer. The teacher must help students master the keys to effective writing so they can apply these to their own work in a manner that frees them from the need for the teacher's judgment. The same holds true of math or science problem solving—or any other subject. Teachers must make sure their students reach a level of understanding that enables them to evaluate their own work and come up with remedies and solutions as needed, both for in the classroom and beyond.

Now I will tell you what that passage is about and I want you to go back and re-read it. As you do, you will be able to step back, monitor your own comprehension, and actually *watch yourself comprehending*. This passage is about the use of worms as bait for fishing. Now go back and re-read and then return here.

The crucial point here is that teachers have two key responsibilities: The first is to understand the critical elements that underpin academic success and to turn those keys to success over to their students in terms they can understand. The second is to help students develop proficiency in applying those critical elements to their own work so students can, over time, become independent performers—that is, lifelong learners.

How can teachers bring their students to this point of academic independence? By engaging students *as partners* in monitoring their own learning while it is unfolding. This way students can watch themselves grow, and feel—and be—in control of that growth.

### **Assessment for Learning—Defined**

To help students become effective monitors of their own learning, teachers can learn from the work of Australian professor Royce Sadler. He instructs us to teach in ways that make sure students always know the answers to the following questions *while they are learning*:

- Where am I going (that is, what am I trying to learn)?
- Where am I now on my journey to learning it?
- How can I close the gap between the two?

In recent decades, researchers and practitioners around the world have developed ways to help students monitor their own learning status by answering these questions. One of these practitioners is Jan Chappuis (2011), who articulates specific ways to make Professor Sadler's guidelines operational during learning in the classroom:

- Where am I going?
  1. Provide students with a clear understanding (student-friendly) of the learning target (e.g., a student-friendly rubric, guide, list of expectations, or set of objectives) from the very beginning of the learning.
  2. Provide examples or models of strong, mid-range, and weak student work in order to promote deeper understanding of the target.
- Where am I now?
  3. Offer students regular access to descriptive feedback focused on specific qualities of their work and inform them about how to do better the next time.
  4. Teach students to self-assess so they can monitor their own academic development, and to set goals so they can determine what comes next in their learning.
- How can I close the gap?
  5. Design lessons focused on one learning target at a time.
  6. Teach students to evaluate key features of their work.
  7. Teach students to observe and record changes in the quality of their work and provide opportunities to share that documentation with others.

In order to maximize the learning success of each student by using these strategies, teachers must believe without question that—

- (a) Students can hit any target that they can envision and that holds still for them;
- (b) Students who watch themselves progressing up the scale of success are more likely to keep trying because success keeps self-doubt at bay; and

- (c) Students can manage and communicate about their own learning in ways that build confidence, engagement, and achievement.

When teachers empower students to track and control their own learning, both key instructional decision makers of the classroom come together to form a learning team. Because the assessment responsibility is shared, some of that work shifts to students, thus granting teachers more instructional time. Most importantly, students' sense of academic self-efficacy and achievement increases, boosting teachers' sense of professional achievement as well.

This discussion of Local Priority #1 has centered on the formative side of classroom assessment—how to use assessment to promote student success. Teachers also have responsibility for periodically judging whether students have met expectations so teachers can report that progress to parents—through report cards or other tools of summative assessment. Both summative and formative applications are significant, but they are different, and every classroom teacher needs to balance the two. That balance has not been our legacy but it can and must be our future.

## **LOCAL PRIORITY #2: MOTIVATE WITH LEARNING SUCCESS, NOT INTIMIDATION**

In American education, we often assume that students are not supposed to like school and, therefore, will not put forth effort to learn unless compelled to do so. Students are motivated with the promise of high report card grades if they learn and threatened with public embarrassment, as well as dire social and economic consequences, if they don't.

As a result, schools sometimes become places of entrapment and humiliation and teachers become people who manipulate students in order to control their learning behavior. In response, most students realize early that the way to minimize risk and vulnerability is to study and learn. If the risk of failure appears too great, or the embarrassment of being labeled a loser becomes too hurtful, the only way to avoid dire personal consequences is to get away. We have only to examine our dropout rates to see how many students have seen getting away as their only viable option.

This manipulation of personal vulnerability is clearly not a healthy, effective way to promote maximum learning for all, encouraging low achievers to rise up to narrow the achievement gap. We know how to maximize learning for our students, and it certainly is not by threatening or embarrassing them, especially struggling learners who are on losing streaks and don't believe they can succeed. Standing at the political podium screaming in a stentorian voice for higher test scores is not the answer. Holding teachers' salaries and even employment status hostage to scores on annual tests that may not even reflect the learning targets the teacher is responsible for teaching—tests that are almost certainly not sensitive enough to measure the influence of an individual teacher—is clearly not the answer.

What is the single biggest factor in determining the motivational impact of test results? The impact of assessment on learning turns on how students respond to assessment results. That emotional reaction will be productive if—and only if—a teacher has taken students to a place where they can say to themselves, “I understand these results and know what they tell me about my growth as a learner—and also what I need to learn next. What's more, I can handle this, and I'm going to keep trying.” Students who can say these things to themselves after being assessed stand a strong chance of ultimately being successful.

What if, in place of that positive response, some students say this? “I don't know what this means, and I have no idea what to do next. I'm obviously too stupid to learn this anyway, and I quit.” Hopelessness rules and once again, intimidation has failed to create any motivation whatsoever. Both student and teacher now have a serious problem, as the assessment results that were supposed to drive learning have just stopped it dead in its tracks.

Assessment is not only something adults do to students, it is something students do to themselves, too. Therefore, what students think about and do with assessment results is at least as important as what the adults think about and do with those results. They see the results and they make decisions, and it is up to teachers and other educators to ensure that those decisions are as positive and productive as possible. The key is creating a system of assessment for learning, which includes making students partners in the assessment process.

## Assessment for Learning—Applied

The purpose of student-involved assessment is that it can motivate productive action on the part of learners. This takes us back to Chappuis' (2011)<sup>1</sup> seven strategies for using assessment to promote learning.

*Strategy 1: Provide students with a clear learning target from the outset.*

By providing students with an understanding of the learning target, we give them the first piece of information they need to measure the distance between where they are now and where they want to be. Just knowing where they are headed can be a confidence builder because learners feel more in control when they do not have to guess about their progress.

*Strategy 2: Provide examples of strong, mid-range, and weak student work.*

By supplementing that description of the learning target with samples of student work depicting a range of quality from beginner (just barely made a start) to proficient (excellent work), we begin to build students' sense of the journey they are about to make. This makes their learning challenge ever clearer and more manageable. Further, picture samples of student work arrayed along an achievement continuum. With these in hand, students can break the journey down into a series of steps (none of them too big), and that increases students' own internal confidence.

*Strategy 3: Offer students regular descriptive feedback as they learn.*

As learning continues, students need frequent helpful feedback. Notice that this is different from a judgment or grade. Good feedback gives students a clear picture of how their performance looks, how others see it, what specific characteristics or qualities stand out, get in the way, or make the performance work well. Such feedback helps students understand how to improve the quality of their work. It is also a vital steppingstone toward self-evaluation.

It is important that feedback occur during instruction. While learning is ongoing, teachers need to minimize judgmental

feedback. During this assessment *for* learning process, the grade book is closed. It will be opened only when it's time to evaluate if the learning has been accomplished.

*Strategy 4: Teach students to self-assess.*

The crucial motivational step comes next: Given that students understand the target, have a sense of the steps they must take to reach it, and have the vocabulary needed to communicate about their progress, they are in a position to begin detecting both strengths (to build on) and deficiencies (to remedy) in their own work. In effect, they can begin to generate their own feedback and to become partners with the teacher in deciding what comes next in their learning. The sense of strong positive academic self-efficacy (control over one's own chances of academic success) that can arise from this step is especially powerful for struggling learners. The likely impact of effective (and often positive) self-assessment on a student, the desire to invest and succeed (read: positive motivation) takes a giant leap forward—and may never retreat again.

*Strategy 5: Design lessons focused on one learning target at a time.*

As students assume some control of their learning, teachers become coaches, building lessons that help students advance the quality of their work one key skill at a time. This is what coaches do in practice: provide descriptive feedback and guided practice on individual skills—such as batting or catching—that later form a larger whole: baseball. The challenge for the teacher lies in identifying the specific individual skills that are important to a larger performance domain such as writing—and then finding ways to help students become more proficient at things such as choosing a topic, writing a lead, improving sentence flow, or editing faulty copy. Over time, the student acquires an ever larger repertoire of individual skills (dozens, if not hundreds of them), always connecting each to that bigger picture of writing (or reading, math, or whatever).

*Strategy 6: Teach students to evaluate key features of their own work.*

The students' (a) understanding of the learning target, (b) continuous access to detailed feedback, and (c) sense of

internal control over their advancement sets them up to manage improvement of their own work. The ability to assess one's own work and then reshape it to meet specified criteria contributes greatly to confidence.

*Strategy 7: Engage students in continuous self-reflection, tracking changes in the quality of their work.*

By providing students opportunities to track their growth and share what they discover with others, we enable them to bring all strategies to bear at once: their knowledge of the target and its critical elements, their sense of how the quality of work can evolve and how their work reflects that evolution, their understanding and use of the vocabulary needed to communicate about their own success, and, finally, their excitement at having successfully navigated the journey from beginner to proficient learner.

This scenario differs fundamentally from the one many adults experienced during school years, where often students were left to “psych out” the teacher or guess at what counted and therefore what to concentrate our studies on; where, if we guessed wrong we failed; where, very often, the final assessment bore little relationship to the content or priorities presented during instruction; where we remained uncertain about the grade we would receive until it arrived; where those who struggled received lots of Fs on their report cards, F's that were supposed to motivate them to try harder; where struggling students were on their own and mostly doomed to finish last—if they finished at all. We know better than this. We know how to help *all* students succeed, not just those at the top of the rank order.

### **Once Again, Understand the Emotional Dynamics**

It is important that we keep clearly in mind how this plays out in the mind of the learner. When principles of assessment for learning as outlined above are done well, they provide the learner with insights which trigger emotions that support learning. When they are missing or are done poorly, they fuel inferences on the part of the learner which trigger counter-productive emotions that stop learning.

When the learning “destination” and the pathway to success are clear it reduces anxiety because the learner is constantly able

to track progress and knows that the target is within reach with continued effort. As the gap continues to reduce in the mind of the learner, it minimizes vulnerability—reduces the risk of failure. In other words, the student’s consistent access to feedback shows the student how to continue to improve.

Students’ involvement in the self-assessment process as they are learning supplies immediate and ongoing affirmation that their efforts are paying off—the sense of being on a winning streak. Students’ sense of the productivity of their studies gives them a clear idea of when they need help and specifically what help they need.

Extended over the long term, other important benefits emerge. As students watch themselves grow, or not, succeed, or not, struggle, or not, they can evaluate their own interest in the learning target in question. In other words, they can evaluate their own ability or desire to master the domains they are studying. This can feed into thoughtful long-term educational planning. It can fuel ongoing optimism or initiate important changes in direction when needed.

On the other hand, when classroom assessment for learning features are missing or are done poorly, the result will be that learning stops. When students are left to guess at the learning destination, it leads to confused and unfocused actions on their part. If they don’t know where they are going, the result can be frustration and learning stops. When the gap between where they are now and where the teacher wants them to be is too great in the mind of the students, they sense the risk and looming danger. This can trigger the inference that they cannot win and they will stop all efforts in that direction. When feedback is inadequate, performance does not improve, thus robbing learners of a sense of control over their own academic well-being. They don’t know how to ask for help, and the result will be losing streaks, pessimism, and a sense of powerlessness. This is what dropping out is all about.

### **LOCAL PRIORITY #3: MAXIMIZE CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT QUALITY**

In my workshops over the years, as teachers begin to learn about issues of assessment quality, they report that I’m scaring them.

Asked why, they say the training is revealing to them that they have not been doing a good job of assessing the achievement of their students. In thirty years of this work, I have yet to meet a teacher who doesn't want to learn how to do it better. The problem is not motivation—it is lack of opportunity to learn.

Many things can go wrong in designing, developing, scoring, and using the results of any assessment. Each of these things can be done well or poorly, and there is nothing complicated about this. We know how to do these things well every time, and we know how to train teachers to do so. Following are descriptions of the four potential problems that teachers need to avoid in constructing assessments.

### **Potential Quality Problem #1: The learning targets to be assessed are ill-defined.**

Fuzzy or inappropriate targets make it impossible to build properly focused test items and scoring guides. Obviously, the test developer must fully understand the learning targets in order to develop good exercises and scoring schemes.

There are two troubling learning target problems that need to be considered because they have a direct impact on school quality and testing practices. One centers on the number of targets and the other on how they are defined at testing time.

#### *Too many targets given available resources*

Put a team of content specialists in one room and ask them to define what it is important for students to learn in their discipline and at their grade level, and the result will be a list of achievement standards that students realistically cannot be expected to master, given the time and other resources available. This has given rise to assessment problems in American education for decades, especially in the content domains that make up the lifelong learner proficiencies about which we care so much: reading, writing, and math problem solving. Here is what typically happens, as recounted by one middle school teacher from California.

As an educator, I feel immense pressure to cover as much as I can before state testing in April. Most educators I know have

an overall map/timeline of what should be covered before state testing. I know that once the state testing is close, I am guilty of cramming as much as possible into the few days before in hopes that they will at least remember some of it. Why does it cover an entire year of material but then they test us before that year is over? I teach 7th grade math—a huge range of concepts to cover in 180 school days. There is hardly enough time to cover them, let alone give the students time to master them. (S. Gandolfo, personal communication, 2013)

The negative impact of this state of affairs is not limited to annual state testing. It will impact the quality and effectiveness of teachers' use of day-to-day classroom assessments as well. When this happens, local school districts have only one viable course of action. Set local priorities; that is, select the highest priority achievement standards, make sure those are covered first and best, and then get to the rest as resources permit.

What if the targets selected for coverage on the state's accountability test do not match those developed by the school district? There is only one viable course of action: go to the state and tell them that their test is not a valid indicator of the achievement of students in this school district and ask them what they intend to do to fix it. All of the alternatives to this approach place students at risk, due to the potential mismeasurement of their achievement.

#### *Learning target definitions are too broad*

The second learning target problem deals with testing traditions that define achievement expectations as mastery of broad content domains. Standardized tests have tended to yield gross scores in domains labeled, "Reading," "Mathematics," "Science," and so on. Within each domain, there are many priority achievement standards that make up the learning targets of that content area. Test developers write items to sample as many of those standards as the very few minutes of available testing time will permit. This means some standards will not be tested at all and those that are will be covered only by an item or two. But nevertheless, the developers assemble those items into that particular test's representation or definition of the total domain.

Put another way, because of practical time constraints, there is never sufficient time to include test items covering all standards that may fall within broad domains, nor can tests typically include enough items covering any one standard to permit us to make confident judgments about student mastery of that standard.

For this reason, at the accountability level of testing and indeed at every level of assessment development and use, if we wish to support student learning, the assessor's goal should be to gather enough samples of student work to inform users about *how each student did in mastering each relevant learning target*. That means the test needs to include enough exercises per standard to lead the teacher to a confident inference about each student's level of mastery. With relatively simple, straightforward targets, that may be just one exercise, or it may require a dozen or more. It depends on the standard. But if a test is to be instructionally helpful, then it needs to suggest to the teacher what comes next in each student's learning.

### **Potential Quality Problem #2: Using the wrong assessment method given the learning target(s).**

Available assessment methods include multiple choice items, essay exercises, performance observations, and direct personal interaction, and some work well with certain kinds of learning but not with others. If the developer is not schooled on what method to use when, quality suffers.

As discussed, in the United States we have relied heavily on multiple choice tests, and this predilection is understandable. Such tests are relatively fast to develop and inexpensive to score. When a hundred thousand students are to take a state assessment, cost is an issue, to be sure. It is crucial to understand, however, that when one begins test development with a decision that multiple choice will be the method used, it restricts the range of learning targets that can be tested to content knowledge and a few simple patterns of reasoning. Relatively more complex standards such as those centered on complex reasoning proficiency and performance skills simply cannot be measured in a multiple choice format.

What if curriculum achievement standards include these kinds of learning, as they most always do—and certainly should.

These require essay tests, performance assessments, and assessments that rely on direct verbal interaction. The demands of college and workplace training our children face as we look to the future require that they develop such complex reasoning abilities. Their teachers must be ready to assess their mastery of those kinds of learning targets as their students develop them.

Just to clarify, there is nothing inherently wrong with multiple choice testing per se. Multiple choice tests (like any other forms of tests) are fine in the hands of competent users and in the appropriate context; that is, when the target is appropriate and when there is a clear right or best answer to a direct question. But they are a formula for disaster in the wrong context or in the hands of a naive user.

### **Potential Quality Problem #3: Poor quality test items and/or scoring schemes.**

If it is to be a multiple choice test, it needs to include only high quality items. If it is to be an essay test, we need good questions and scoring guidelines. So it is with each available assessment method. Pre-service teacher and administrator training programs absolutely must include training in the development of assessments, but in the absence of prior preparation, local in-service programs must become a priority. Professional development is available from many publishers and vendors, such as the Pearson Assessment Training Institute, Solution Tree, and Battelle for Kids ([battelleforkids.org](http://battelleforkids.org)), and Corwin, among others.

Neither teacher nor administrator licensing examinations typically certify competence in assessment, so we have a national faculty and staff largely unschooled in the accurate assessment of student learning and in the use of the assessment process to both support and verify student learning. This must change.

### **Potential Quality Problem #4: Ineffective communication of assessment results.**

When test results are to feed into instructional decisions specifically intended to support student learning (as with assessment for learning), communication of those results must convey precise detail. In this context, results that take the form of total scores will not deliver the information needed.

Problems also arise if the communication of results is delayed for a long time. Students don't stop growing after they take the annual state test, so those test results that arrive weeks or even months after the test is administered no longer reflect students' achievement status. While teachers often fully intend to use results to modify their instruction, they cannot do so when the results don't arrive until the school year is nearly at an end. Timely feedback is important.

Further, we can anticipate problems when test scores are communicated to a user (decision maker) who doesn't understand what those scores mean—and who therefore cannot interpret them properly.

Clearly, those who have not mastered sound communication of assessment results place students directly in harm's way. Most teachers and many administrators have not been given the opportunity to learn about this either.

In summary, then, quality assessments are created by those who begin with clear and appropriate learning targets, select proper assessment methods, build quality assessments, and communicate results effectively given their intended purpose.

## **Our History of Ineffective Remedies**

For decades, the education community has tried to make up for the lack of assessment literacy by, for example, including ready-made assessments in published text materials or by providing teachers with libraries or banks of test items they can use to build the tests they need. Unfortunately, these assessments are (a) often developed by those who also lack assessment literacy and so lack quality control standards, and (b) do not align with students' and teachers' daily informational needs in time to influence instruction. Here's the bottom line: *Unless teachers can create quality assessments on their own and consistently weave them effectively into ongoing teaching and learning, student achievement will suffer.*

## **WHO CAN/MUST LEAD THE CHANGE PROCESS?**

Several local players hold the keys to completing the three changes identified in this chapter: local community leaders; policy

makers at local, state, and federal levels; school leaders; teachers; and those in higher education who train professional educators.

*Local communities* (parents, grandparents, taxpayers) can take the lead by asking their local school board, administrators, and teachers the following questions:

About Local Priority #1 focused on *why we assess*:

- Do our schools have a policy requiring a balance of formative assessment (to support learning) and summative assessment (to certify it) in our classrooms? If not, what is our plan for instituting such a policy?
- Are our school leaders trained and qualified to achieve this balance? If not, what are our professional development plans?
- Can and do our teachers use classroom assessments both to support and to certify student learning? Again, if not and given that our teachers need this expertise, what is our professional development plan?

About Local Priority #2, *motivating with learning success*:

- Are our teachers trained to engage students in using high quality assessment to support their own learning—and eventually certify their own competence? If not, when and how will they be trained?
- How do we motivate all of our students for productive learning?
- What, specifically, are we doing to motivate struggling learners?

About Local Priority #3, *quality assessments*:

- What is the quality of day-to-day classroom assessments?
- Are our school leaders qualified to evaluate those assessments? If so, are we doing a good job of assessing throughout our schools and classrooms? If not, what is our plan for doing a better job?
- Are our teachers and principals schooled in the principles of sound assessment practice?
- Do our hiring criteria include assessment competence?

If answers generated locally are unsatisfying after reading this book, consider assertive action through school site councils, consultation with district leadership, and meetings with school board members. Consider a task force to delve into local assessment practices or to review the district's school improvement plan and evaluate what it says about assessment quality and use.

As this local activity is being conducted *federal, state, and local policy makers* might profitably seek out information about what teachers need to know and be able to do to use assessment in new ways to support student learning. Consider reexamination of teacher and administrator training standards and requirements, as well as the criteria used in the certification and hiring of these practitioners.

*Local school district administrators* can take the lead, first, by evaluating your own professional level of assessment literacy and acting on the results as needed. Then make sure conditions are in place within your district to make assessment a productive part of teaching and learning. Are your learning targets clear and appropriate? Is your policy environment driving sound practice? Are your teachers assessment literate, and are they ready to communicate assessment results (to students, parents, school boards, administrators, and one another) in ways that support and certify achievement, depending on the context?

*Teachers* can take the lead by evaluating and maximizing your own assessment literacy. If you find it necessary, go to your supervisor and seek concrete and specific opportunities to learn. One of the most important outcomes of professional development in this realm can be time savings through (a) greater classroom assessment efficiency, and (b) students' responsibility for their own assessment (in partnership with you) while they are learning.

## **THIS IS PERSONAL**

One gloomy winter afternoon, our daughter, Krissy, arrived home from third grade full of gloom herself. She said she knew we were going to be angry with her. Then she held out a sheet of paper—the third-grade size with the wide lines. On it, she had written a story.

Upon inquiring, we found out that her assignment was to write about someone or something she cared about deeply. She

wrote of Kelly, an adorable kitten who had come to be part of our family, but who had to return to the farm after two weeks because of allergies.

On the sheet of paper was an emergent writer's version of this story—not sophisticated, but poignant. Krissy's recounting of events was accurate and her story conveyed her sadness and disappointment at losing her new little friend.

At the bottom of the page, which filled about three quarters of the page, was a big red circled "F." We asked her why she had gotten that grade and she told us that the teacher said she was to fill the page with writing and she only used two-thirds. Her teacher had added that Krissy had better learn to follow directions or she would continue to fail.

When she had finished telling Nancy and me this story, Krissy put the sheet of paper down on the kitchen table and, with a discouraged look, said in a totally intimidated voice, "I'll never be a good writer anyway," and left the room.

Though her grade certainly did not reflect it, Krissy had succeeded at hitting an important target, at least at some level, because she produced some pretty good writing. But her confidence in herself as a writer was deeply shaken because her teacher confused one expectation that students comply with directions with a second, and unrelated, expectation that they learn to write well. Let's analyze this event in a bit more detail.

In this case, the primary focus of the assessment was on controlling student behavior, not advancing academic achievement. (Had that not been the case, the teacher would surely have commented on the writing.) Krissy didn't know that following directions precisely took precedence over writing well. Further, the learning target to be assessed was length, not quality. Krissy didn't understand that either. The governing evaluation criterion was "Fill the page," not "Write well." As a result, both the assessment and the feedback had a negative impact on this young student. Without question, it is quite easy to see if a page is full, but was that (or should that be) the point? Should we assess what is easy to measure or what is important? It is challenging to assess something as complicated as writing and to formulate and deliver understandable and timely feedback that helps a student not only improve, but also remain confident about her ability to grow as a writer.

In sum, the purpose was not clear, the learning target was not clear, the assessment was of inferior quality due to unclear performance criteria, and, as a result, the feedback delivered to the learner was destructive. It took a long time for us to work our way through this and to help Kris believe there was a pretty good writer trapped in there. Fast forward to high school English class and Kris's first term paper assignment.

In this situation, Kris's assignment was to read three literary pieces by the same author, develop a thesis statement, and defend it with evidence from the literary works. Note the role that assessment played as a teacher in this case.

The teacher began by distributing copies of a term paper that was of outstanding quality. The students' homework assignment that evening was to read it and try to discern what made it outstanding. The next day in class the students brainstormed, coming up with a long list of characteristics. The next homework assignment was to boil that list down—to group the characteristics into the five or six categories that really governed quality. The next day in class they argued about that final short list, finally arriving at consensus. They included qualities such as the paper's organization and use of supportive evidence, among others.

Next came the teamwork. Students were grouped into teams of five or six, and each team was assigned one of the categories. Their job was to define that criterion and describe as concisely as possible what a term paper would look like if it (a) was outstanding with respect to their characteristic, (b) was of poor quality, or (c) was in the middle. Teams took turns sharing their work with the class and refining it as they went. The keys to success were becoming clearer to the students as they developed definitions and rating scales. Notice that these were developed by students, not simply handed to them by the teacher.

On the following day, the teacher shared copies of a term paper she had fabricated that was of dismal quality. Homework assignment: Read and evaluate the paper using the agreed upon criteria. What kept that paper from working? What needed revision? Students shared their analyses the next day in class.

Finally, the teacher instructed them to begin drafting their papers, keeping the evaluation criteria they had developed together clearly in mind. As they drafted, they worked in pairs and small teams to review each other's papers, providing feedback,

again, in terms of the specific criteria that characterized a quality paper. The teacher also offered to review anyone's draft and provide feedback on any one of the criteria if requested to do so.

Focused revision continued in this manner until students were ready to submit their papers. A submission deadline was suggested, but it could be extended through negotiation with the teacher. Her perspective was this: If you treat young people like adults, they will behave like adults. This is an assessment literate teacher.

Can you anticipate the quality of the papers these students produced? They were almost all outstanding.

The differences between what happened here and what happened with Kris's third grade kitten story obviously are substantial. In high school, in contrast to third grade, the learning target was clear and the teacher made sure it was understood by the learners. That understanding was deepened through student involvement in defining the criteria that would indicate strong performance and through their study of samples of work. Focused revision was interspersed with descriptive feedback, improving the quality of each paper during the writing process. The results were more than a set of term papers that received high grades, as the experience spawned a group of more confident writers. This kind of growth and self-awareness (not to mention the ability to coach others) can happen for every student in every classroom.

An elementary school teacher from Washington state described the impact of these practices on the achievement of his students in a similar manner:

Within the first month that I began using formative assessment practices in my classroom I saw achievement gains from virtually all students, with the greatest gains being made by the lowest achieving students. Using these practices has completely changed the learning environment in my classroom. Good instruction is still important, but the focus has shifted from teaching to learning and from the teacher to the student. Now that learning targets are clear to students they are able to take responsibility for meeting those targets. By regularly reflecting on where they are in relation to the targets they are able to decide what action they need to take or what help they need in moving forward to meet those targets.

Formative assessment has removed barriers to learning in my classroom . . . [my] students now know that, when they take responsibility for their own learning, they can be successful. (B. Herzog, personal communication, 2013)

### **Assessment for Twenty-First Century Schools**

This analysis issues a very serious indictment of assessment in American education, calling out and demanding assertive action from those who can turn our assessment systems around: policy makers and professional educators at federal, state, and local levels, parents and community leaders, the academic community, and the academic and commercial testing community. If I have angered you, I urge you to analyze why. Whose interests should we be thinking of and protecting in our assessment practices?

We have established the evaluation criteria for judging the quality of local school district assessment systems. Now local leaders must gather the local evidence, and make your judgments about what needs to change in your system. We know how to build balanced local assessment systems that both promote and certify student learning—that is, that link assessment to teaching, learning, and student well-being. Good practice involves much more than valid and reliable once-a-year test scores. There is no question, we know better and can do better.

### **ENDNOTE**

1. From Chappuis, J., *Seven Strategies of Assessment for Learning*, 1st edition, © 2010. Adapted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., Upper Saddle River, NJ.