

Data and Assessments

Effective assessment systems accompanied by other resources for the well-being of students are essential to improving education quality. Current assessment practices are linked to attaining specific scores on highly constrained tests in order to prod states, districts and schools into doing a better job. Many states use standardized tests that are relatively easy to administer and score but have little connection to what a student learns as part of a high quality education. They are not designed to promote learning but to rank and rate students, teachers, and schools. Constructing effective assessment systems requires reexamining the goals of educational assessment and putting aside much of what we have been doing in education assessment.

Assessing student learning should be directly linked to *improving* student learning. Current large-scale assessments are only indirectly linked to student learning, with assessment tasks mainly proxies for broader education goals. Much money has been poured into those assessments, but there is no research evidence that they improve student learning. Improved test scores may reflect improved test taking skills or be the results of focused drills rather than increased learning of complex skills and concepts. Large-scale assessments give general information on student achievement and progress, but they do not offer reliable or valid information on the specific instructional needs of individual students.

To promote learning in the classroom, we need better assessment tools that directly impact student learning. Formative assessments provide detailed information about student learning directly and clearly to both students and teachers. These assessments allow for re-teaching and redoing of instructional tasks. Commercial and interim assessments do not accomplish this. Formative assessments allow teachers to make adjustments to instruction and learning activities to ensure student achievement of learning goals. They also provide opportunities for teachers to develop essential assessment skills and deep knowledge of both standards and their students.

There is an urgent need to provide resources for professional development related to formative assessments—an essential yet neglected component of assessment systems. According to Linda Darling-Hammond, teacher involvement in producing and scoring formative assessments helps develop capacity for analyzing student work and performance and making instructional decisions based on complex student learning data. In addition, Darling Hammond points out that professional development through hands-on teacher involvement in development, choosing, and scoring of formative assessments is a key common factor in countries whose students do well on international assessments. Finally, Darling Hammond has shown that countries excelling on international assessments have complete assessment systems with substantive formative assessment components. The current U.S. system is incomplete, lacking this component.

Formative assessments offer one of the most effective ways of building the capacity of teachers to analyze student work, plan and adjust instruction that focuses on the progression of learning and student needs, and understand the nature of education goals. Again, results from high performing countries indicate that teacher quality is supported by participation in assessment development and scoring from the classroom to the state levels.

A complete assessment system should address the range of factors in learning, not simply enabling skills and basic content. An assessment system should provide opportunities for students to demonstrate the ability to apply skills and knowledge to real life situations and to demonstrate the essential dispositions for continued learning and participation in a democratic society. Formative assessments will not be employed if the large scale assessments do not address the same level of skills and content as the formative assessments. Current multiple choice and short answer tasks, in most large scale assessments, make such alignment impossible and do not tap students' abilities to apply knowledge and skills to complex situations. A complete assessment *system* must include components and tasks that produce 1) information to help teachers and students discern progress and areas of needed attention, 2) data that indicates whether schools and districts and states that support education are providing needed resources and policy support, and 3) a continuing effort to build the capacity of teachers to teach, students to learn, and parents and the public to support education.

The nation and states are faced with limited resources for education and must use them wisely. With limited resources, it makes little sense to invest in developing more large-scale summative assessments. Formative assessments address a missing system component and provide opportunities for teachers to deepen their understanding of educational goals, students' needs, and their own pedagogy. They also increase student capacity for self assessment. Efforts should start with accomplished teachers and the building of increased teacher capacity to educate through the development, use, and researching of a wide range of assessments and assessment tasks.