

# **Common Formative Assessments: The Centerpiece of an Integrated Standards-Based Assessment System**

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Classroom assessment requires time. With so many standards to teach, and with so many diverse student learning needs to meet, instructional time is becoming increasingly precious. How, then, can we urge educators and leaders to consider adding yet another type of assessment that will take even more time away from instruction? We must first determine the actual impact of existing assessments on instruction and student learning by determining the real worth of each of those assessments. Once this is accomplished, educators are in a much stronger position to decide whether to continue administering assessments that consume precious instructional time without yielding the kind of valuable feedback on student learning that can be used to adjust instruction.

There is also the question of the frequency of assessments: How often should educators assess to determine student learning? Assessment experts agree that numerous short assessments given over time provide a better indication of a student's learning than one or two large assessments given in the middle and at the end of the grading period. The true value of assessment is its ability to help educators make accurate and timely inferences about student progress so that they can modify instruction accordingly.

And finally, what to do with all the data we are collecting? Without a systematic process to analyze assessment data for the explicit purpose of informing instruction, the valuable information that could be gleaned from such an analysis remains untapped. Douglas Reeves (2004) refers to this dilemma as the "over-testing and under-assessing" of students (p. 71). Richard DuFour (2005) has aptly named this the DRIP syndrome: Schools have become "data rich but information poor" (p. 40).

School systems across the country are realizing the need for a definite process to analyze assessment results and use that data to inform instruction. Common formative assessments—assessments for learning that are collaboratively designed, administered, scored, and analyzed by team members— provide the answers to these key questions.

## **Aligning Assessments of and for Learning**

Each year, schools administer the large-scale external assessments created by their state to gauge student progress toward attainment of the standards. The results of these assessments are used to determine whether or not schools have met "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) as required by No Child Left Behind. By analyzing large-scale assessment results, educators and leaders can make important changes in curriculum content and delivery as well as enhance individual classroom assessments. However, the usefulness of such data is limited for several reasons:

1. Looked at in isolation, the results from state assessments have only minimal impact on an individual child's academic growth (Popham, 2001).

2. The time that elapses between the administration of the state tests and the receipt of results greatly limits the assessment's relevancy to ongoing instructional decision-making.
3. State test data focus on comparisons between groups of students, rather than on individual student gains from one assessment to the next.
4. The feedback from most state assessments is not specific enough to pinpoint the unique learning needs of individual students.
5. Even though state test results provide a "snapshot" of student understanding, when looked at in isolation, they do not provide the "photo album" of student understanding (gathered over time) that can truly represent what students know and are able to do.

To compensate for these inherent limitations of external assessments, educators need a dynamic, in-school assessment system that includes common formative assessments. By combining large-scale summative assessments of student learning with smaller in-school formative assessments for learning, educators can create a more comprehensive representation of student progress.

This is not to minimize the role of external assessments in favor of internal assessments only. Both assessments of and for learning are important, and "while they are not interchangeable, they must be compatible" (NEA, 2003, p. 7). The key to maximizing the usefulness of both types is to intentionally align assessments of and for learning so that they are measuring the same student progress. If educators begin administering shorter assessments for learning aligned to their district and state assessments periodically throughout the school year, and then use the resulting data to adjust instruction accordingly, they will very likely see corresponding results on their assessments of learning and realize assessment's dual purpose: "as an instructional tool for use while learning is occurring and as an accountability tool to determine if learning has occurred" [NEA, 2003, p. 3].

### **Predictive Value**

As educators strive to deliberately align their formative and summative assessments, the formative assessment results will provide them with credible evidence of how students are likely to do on the summative assessments—in time for them to make instructional changes. By collaboratively designing the summative assessment before any actual instruction takes place, educators are "beginning with the end in mind." Knowing—in advance—what the students will need to know and be able to do on the summative assessment will most definitely impact instruction. To measure student progress along the way, educators can administer shorter formative assessments that are closely aligned to their summative assessment. The formative assessment results, when analyzed carefully, will provide the educators with "predictive value" as to how their students are likely to do on the subsequent assessments. The results will allow them to more accurately diagnose student learning needs to determine what instructional modifications are needed.

This underscores the need for collaborative teams of educators to regularly meet to analyze the results of their formative assessments, to set a short-term goal for student achievement, and then to decide together the most effective instructional strategies they will use to accomplish their goal. This is the important work of grade-level and department data teams. The information gained from this kind of focused collaboration can become a powerful means for differentiating instruction and designing appropriate lessons and learning activities for small, flexible groups of students with specific learning needs. Educators can identify and provide appropriate

interventions for students whose assessment results indicate they will have difficulty achieving proficiency by the end of the instructional cycle. Educators can identify and provide accelerated instruction for those students who already demonstrate proficiency on the formative assessment. Special educators and special-area teachers can use these formative assessment results diagnostically to help students prepare for upcoming summative assessments during their instructional time with them.

School systems often administer quarterly assessments in targeted content areas for specific grade levels so district and school administrators can "benchmark" student progress across the district. If the district benchmark assessments are designed to reflect the format and rigor of the state assessments (including selected- and constructed-response formats with proper standards terminology), the assessment results can "forecast" how students are likely to do on the state assessments, again in time to make instructional changes. Deliberately matching in-school formative assessments to district benchmark assessments will extend the alignment—and the benefits—even further.

### **What Are Common Formative Assessments?**

Common formative assessments serve many of the same functions as classroom formative assessments, but with two key distinctions:

1. They are collaboratively designed and administered by grade-level or course teams to all students several times during the quarter, semester, trimester, or school year.
2. They are intentionally created to gauge student understanding of the most essential (power) standards only.

These assessments for learning are designed as matching pre- and post-assessments to ensure a same-assessment to same-assessment comparison of individual student growth. They are similar in design and format to district and state assessments so that students have opportunities throughout the year to practice responding to items that match in type, terminology, and rigor the items they will encounter on the state assessments.

Common formative assessment items typically represent a blend of item types, including selected response (multiple choice, true/false, matching, and fill-in items where students select an answer choice from a provided list) and constructed response (both short-response and/or extended response) where students must "construct" their response to an item and reveal the extent to which they can apply the targeted concepts and skills.

Student responses from both types of assessments allow educators to make more accurate inferences about student understanding than they can from the results of one type of assessment format only. Educators create answer keys to score the selected-response items and scoring guides (rubrics) to score the constructed-response items. The length of the assessment is kept short to facilitate quick scoring, either collaboratively or independently. Educators analyze the results in data teams to guide instructional planning and thus better meet the learning needs of all students prior to the administration of the next common formative assessment. The common formative assessment process shows how assessment actually informs instruction.

## **Data Teams**

These teams serve a specific function: to analyze common formative assessment data that can be used to target and implement instructional strategies aimed at improving student performance between the pre- and post-assessments. The data team process formerly includes five main steps:

1. Collect and chart the student performance data.
2. Analyze strengths and obstacles.
3. Set a short-term goal for student improvement.
4. Select effective instructional strategies (both experience-based and research-based) to meet that goal.
5. Determine results indicators to gauge the effectiveness of the selected teaching strategies.

## **Alignment**

To ensure deliberate alignment between in-school common assessments and district, end-of-course, and state assessments, try to create this alignment as early as possible in the sequence of steps. The most effective way to accomplish this is to review state assessment requirements. Refer also to current year and prior year school and district state assessment data along with released state assessment items from prior years. This will assist educators in writing common formative assessment items that resemble the format, rigor, and wording of what students will experience on the state assessments.

Intentionally aligning in-school common formative assessments to district, end-of-course, and state assessments should not be misconstrued as teaching to the test, but regarded instead as sound and fair instructional practice. The process is much like that of a coach who understands both the rules and strategies necessary to win a game and then helps his or her players learn those strategies during practice sessions before each big game. When grade-level or course data team members collaboratively design a matching set of common formative pre- and post-assessments—aligned to external district and state assessments—they will know in advance exactly what those assessments require of students in terms of content, skills, and difficulty. To meet this "cognitive demand," educators do not teach to the test, but rather they teach to the skills that their students will need to be successful (Popham, 2003).

## **The Benefits of Using Common Formative Assessments**

Educators who invest the time in this process will enjoy many benefits. First and foremost, they will receive regular and timely feedback regarding student attainment of the most critical standards. As a result, they can better meet the diverse learning needs of all students. In addition, providing students with "multiple-measure assessments" (assessments that include a combination of both selected- and constructed-response items) allows students to demonstrate their understanding in a variety of formats. The common formative assessment process promotes ongoing collaboration opportunities for grade-level, course, and department educators to meet regularly to discuss and share effective instructional practices that they can implement immediately in their classrooms.

Common formative assessments also foster consistent expectations and priorities within a grade level, course, and department regarding standards, instruction and assessment. This includes the establishment of agreed-

upon criteria for student proficiency within each individual classroom, grade level, school, and across the district. Understanding the big picture of how each powerful practice connects with all of the others promotes the deliberate alignment of classroom, school, district, and state assessments to better prepare students for achieving success at each level. Most importantly, common formative assessment results enable educators to diagnose student learning needs accurately *in time to make instructional modifications*. In addition, common formative assessments provide students with timely feedback regarding their current level of understanding so that they can identify for themselves what they already know and what they have yet to learn. In these ways, both educators and students are able to utilize common formative assessment results to their maximum potential.

Administrators can support educators in using quality common formative assessments by first understanding the role these assessments for learning play in an interdependent instruction and assessment system, and then helping grade-level or course/department teams find the time to meet on a regular basis. This will most certainly require creative scheduling, but the importance of establishing time structures to allow for collaboration cannot be overemphasized. Implementing common formative assessments—including the design, administration, scoring, and analysis of assessment results—requires considerable time and commitment on the part of everyone involved. Educators benefit greatly when administrators rearrange teaching schedules and student supervision responsibilities in order to make regular collaboration possible. In this way, they are helping their school become a true professional learning community. (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2005; DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

### **A Powerful Process**

Educators who take an active role in creating common formative assessments to gauge student understanding of high-priority standards will experience firsthand the power of this process. When introducing this new practice, realize that it may be initially perceived as just "one more thing" to do. Leaders should first show and explain the connections between the interdependent practices so that everyone understands the big picture of an integrated standards-based instruction and assessment system. Leaders should emphasize the importance of common formative assessments as the way to connect all these key practices in a truly meaningful way. It helps to keep in mind at the onset that this is a process to be completed over time, not a singular event. To implement each of these practices effectively, they should be gradually incorporated into the existing culture, one by one. It helps to keep everyone focused on these powerful practices that, over time, will truly improve instruction and achievement for all students.

The evidence is in: common formative assessments produce results. "Persuasive empirical evidence shows that these [properly formulated formative classroom assessments] work; clearly, teachers should use them to improve both teaching and learning" (Popham, 2006, p. 87). Once educators implement this process with fidelity in their own schools and districts, they will be able to attest to the truth of this statement themselves.