



Bridging Two Worlds: The Role of Assessment Literacy for Supporting Balanced Assessment Systems

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Choose Your Own Adventure

1. A teacher is planning a unit on Fractions for Gr 4 Math. He is trying to figure out how to assess student mastery before, during, and after instruction.
2. An Assistant Superintendent just received a handful of brochures in the mail trying to sell interim/benchmark assessments and other assessment products. She is trying to figure out if her district should buy one of the interim/benchmark assessments.
3. State policymakers are considering changing the state assessment system and creating an RFP for a new test vendor. They are unsure of the implications of this decision or how to go about making this decision.

*You can “choose your own adventure” and go with others who want to discuss the same issue.
Choose a note-taker who will share out at the end.*

- What advice would you give this teacher, school leader, or state policymaker?
- What assessment literacy concepts did you draw on and apply to this situation (if you aren't sure, take a guess)?
- What questions about assessment literacy surfaced in your group conversation?



Assessment Literacy to Support Balanced Systems of Assessment

Educators

Educators need to be able to design both instructional and assessment activities that allow students, parents, and teachers to understand the scope of student understanding relative to the intended learning processes and outcomes including student motivation and engagement.

Designing high quality tasks for both instruction and assessment means that educators need to have a working knowledge of the kinds of features that support meaningful interactions with the content for students. This means having an understanding of cognitive complexity and what makes things more or less complex in a specific domain. It also includes the more basic ideas of how best to structure tasks to elicit the desired evidence, how much to scaffold the interactions or not, and how best to ensure the tasks are accessible for as wide of a range of students as possible. Having high-quality tasks and eliciting meaningful evidence is a great start, but it is not enough. Educators should be skilled at evaluating student work, first descriptively to gain insights into student thinking and task quality and then more inferentially by developing useful tools (e.g., rubrics) for scoring student work.

Educators should have a working understanding of the key criteria for balanced assessment systems—coherence, comprehensiveness, continuity, efficiency, and utility—and be able to translate how they criteria are instantiated in the context of their classroom and even school assessment systems.

We have found in our extensive work with teachers that tools situated in a sociocultural framework can help begin to improve educators' assessment literacy at scale. We have helped several states and school districts employ this framework to build cadres of local assessment experts to ensure that the assessment learning is sustained. Developing an effective cadre of experts requires ongoing professional development and ample opportunity for those engaging in the work to share successes and concerns. Tools such as assessment/task design templates, student work analysis protocols, and assessment quality review tools all provide educators with resources they can continue to use in PLCs and other collaborative learning opportunities.



School and District Leaders

School and district leaders are key players in the design of balanced assessment systems. They have to be leaders in the design of district assessment systems, but they also need a clear understanding of the hard work required of teachers. Much of the attention on assessment literacy has focused on developing teachers' knowledge and skills for improving formative and classroom assessment. There has been much less attention devoted to helping principals and central office personnel become assessment leaders. This is especially important because district leaders, in particular, are responsible for selecting interim and other commercial assessments that may cause considerable incoherence in district assessment systems.

Like educators, school and district leaders need to have a solid understanding of designing and implementing balanced systems by recognizing how to maximize criteria like coherence and utility. Leaders certainly need to have the knowledge and skills to evaluate the quality of individual assessments. Perhaps most importantly, school leaders especially need to understand how to facilitate adult learning and to establish a learning culture in their schools.

- We suggest some tools to help school and district leaders facilitate continuous improvement processes within their school or district such as assessment system audits (e.g., assessment mapping) and assessment quality audits (classroom and commercial interim/benchmark assessments).

The most important role for an educational leader is to establish a learning and assessment culture among school personnel. For example, making the examination of student work a regular part of every faculty and professional learning community meeting can help support honest discussions about how well students are learning, how learning is progressing over time, how school personnel can improve that learning. In terms of assessment utility, such examinations can help educators and leaders first describe and then draw inferences about the ways in which different assessments are able to elicit useful evidence of student thinking and performance. Such discussions should lead to conversations about student learning, curriculum, equity, instruction, and other critical aspects of schooling.



State Policy Leaders

While we argue that districts and even schools (depending on the district) are the more appropriate loci for balanced assessment systems, states because of federal and state accountability and assessment requirements can have an outsized influence on any system operating within the particular state. We posit that state leaders should have a working knowledge of most of the following concepts and assessment issues:

- ✓ Large-scale assessment can serve a very limited set of uses, particularly monitoring and evaluation functions.
- ✓ Similarly, if it seems too good to be true, it probably is. There are no magic bullet assessments. The manifests itself frequently in discussions of subscores.
- ✓ Long-term stability in the state assessment system is critical to best serve the monitoring function and to minimize confusion in districts, schools, and classrooms.
- ✓ There is a plethora of research about the negative unintended consequences associated with high-stakes accountability uses of tests and this evidence should be considered carefully in the development of any new test-based accountability policies.
- ✓ All tests contain uncertainty due to a variety of sources and leaders should be careful not to overplay small changes in any given year or jump to other causal conclusions too quickly.

We argue that this work must start with a clear vision of learning and learning outcomes that goes beyond the content standards. For example, groups such as EdLeader21¹ have worked with states and districts on developing a portrait of a graduate² that can help key stakeholders develop a shared understanding of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions expected of all students. Once such a vision is established, state policy leaders, can develop at least an outline of a theory of action for how assessment and accountability can support (or hinder this vision). We intend for such an exercise to lead to discussions about the proper role of state assessment compared to supporting high-quality district and school assessment, the potential negative influence of accountability pressures on distorting quality assessment practices, and the importance of stability to avoid distracting educators and others from the hard work of teaching and learning.

¹ <http://www.edleader21.com/home>

² <https://portraitofagraduate.org/>

