Assessment to Improve Teaching and Learning

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Session overview

• I’m going to present some introductory information about formative and classroom assessment

• Jane will present the details about how teachers use a variety of classroom/formative assessments made available to them

• Nikki will describe key issues of a district trying to implement such strategies
The “New” Hot Topic

• Although many of us have been working on small scale/classroom assessment issues for years, there has been a rapid increase in interest in any intervention that can improve performance on end-of-year tests
  – Look at this program
  – Boulder CCSSO summer conference
  – FAST SCASS

• While we don’t think that increasing end-of-year test scores is the right reason for pursuing formative assessment strategies, it has been documented as one of the most powerful interventions studied…if done right!
What is Formative Assessment?

• The language has gotten tricky and the terms, as Shepard notes, have been “hijacked”, but formative assessments are those activities designed to provide feedback in order to improve the teaching-learning interaction

• It is really about use…

• It could be more helpful to think of formative assessment as an instructional/learning activity rather than an assessment activity

• Do assessments (e.g., “benchmark tests”) used to evaluate programs count as “formative”?  
  – Perhaps yes, but for our discussion, we are focusing on information used to make inside-the-classroom decisions
Why Formative Assessment?

• Enables students to learn to monitor and adjust their own learning
• Allows teachers to learn more about both student learning and meaningful content
• Provides teachers with information to tailor instruction for groups of students or even individual students
• These features can serve as criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of formative assessment programs
Key Features

• Represents important content and skills
• Placed strategically in a learning progression
  – Some argue whether it should be cognitively or socioculturally based, but there are enough overlapping features to support a shared perspective
• Provides targeted feedback about specific aspects of performance
Learning Progressions

• Are not linear
• Might best be represented by complex models such schema indicating that progress could be the development of richer understanding of a set of concepts rather than simply accumulating more concepts
• Are rarely embodied in state content standards—this is a major concern!
The Role of Curriculum

• There is an active debate within the formative assessment community regarding the degree to which formative assessment activities need to be embedded in rich curriculum
  – Some argue that formative assessment can be used to improve teaching and learning regardless of curriculum context
  – Others state quite strongly that for several reasons, formative assessments must be embedded in curriculum
Classroom Assessment Systems

• Are classroom assessment and formative assessment synonymous?
• As most of you know, the answer is NO!
• A comprehensive classroom assessment system embodies much more than formative assessment activities
  – but classroom assessment systems should be conceptually-consistent with the goals of formative assessment
• Classroom assessment systems are tied to both content standards and specific curricular programs. The relationship between these two sets of learning goals is critical.
Vision for Standards-based Classrooms

• In successful standards-based classrooms, teachers consistently link instruction with standards, student learning, and assessment.

✓ Instruction, assessment, and learning are focused on content and performance standards
✓ Instruction and assessment are integrated
✓ Instruction and assessment are informed and adjusted by documented evidence of student learning
Goals of Classroom-Based Assessment Systems

- Report valid information to parents and the public
- Pursue ongoing curriculum development and other instructional decisions
- Should broaden assessment possibilities (beyond what’s possible in a large-scale assessment)
- Should involve students as active participants
- Help teachers learn more about how children develop as learners
Key Features of a Classroom-based Assessment Program

• Assessment addresses the learning experiences in which students are engaged

• Classroom assessment procedures should describe clearly and accurately how students do on multiple samples tasks over an extended period of time

• Students are active participants
Key Features of a Classroom-based Assessment Program (continued)

• An assessment program should be multifaceted—should focus on achievement, process, and quality of self-assessment

• Should include formative assessments as continuous and inseparable from instruction

• A yearly assessment plan should guide the timing and use of a variety of assessment procedures

• These assessments should work together to form a composite evaluation or grade
Key Features of a Classroom-based Assessment Program (continued)

• Assessment strengthens teachers’ and students’ knowledge.
  – Teachers and students should grow in their ability to make insightful analyses from the data gathered.

• Record keeping and collections of work samples by both teachers and students provide the systematic information that facilitates communication.
Professional Learning

• We are asking for assessment and instructional actions that go far beyond how most teachers have been prepared

• But it is not just teachers who have to learn…
  – School leadership is key to supporting meaningful assessment and learning in classrooms
  – District and state leaders must direct resources—broadly speaking—to ensure that schools are able to implement these programs with high degree of fidelity
Assessment Literacy?

• This term gets used often to capture the professional development needs

• Many are now pushing for increasing instructional literacy
  – Pedagogical content knowledge
  – How people learn
  – Deep understanding of content

• And yes, they need to learn how to select/create meaningful assessment activities

• But is that enough…
  – No, I and others would argue that teachers need practice (with modeling) with looking at and learning from student work…
Assessment-instruction interaction

• What is the mechanism for turning an assessment result—broadly speaking—into a useful instructional action?
  – What form do the data need to be in to facilitate this translation (e.g., scored item responses, actual student work, teacher observations and reflections on student performance)?
  – If the data must be student work, does that limit the scalability?

• How do cognitive and sociocultural conceptions help us better understand this interaction?

• Do different types of formative assessment design promote increases in teacher knowledge compared with other designs?
• We are working and will be working to answer these questions
• Jane and Nikki will discuss a program that might help us get at some of these answers