|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | **District Assessment System Design Toolkit**  *Introduction to the Toolkit* |
| *Why the work matters, what a district invests, and what it gets in return* |

**Developed By**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Joseph Martineau** | Senior Associate |  |
| **Kathy Dewsbury-White**  **Ed Roeber** | President & Chief Executive Officer  Assessment Director |  |
| **Ellen Vorenkamp** | Assessment Consultant |  |
| **Steven Snead**  **Jonathan Flukes** | Supervisor, Curriculum & Instruction Unit  Research, Evaluation, & Assessment Consultant |  |

# Introduction

District Assessment System Design (DASD) is not an easy task because there are many stakeholders with potentially conflicting needs that must be satisfied with a district’s assessment system. The DASD Toolkit provides materials for a skilled facilitator (who is also an expert in assessment) to guide a district through a principled design process in three workshops. It is built to facilitate the process of evaluating an existing district assessment system and to either revise or replace the existing system.

The reason that the Toolkit may play an important role is that designing a new district assessment system or revising an existing district assessment system so that it fulfills the needs of various stakeholders is very hard work. The way the process is carried out can mean the difference between designing s system that adequately attends to all stakeholder needs and one that meets the needs of a select few. It can be the difference between a house and a pile of bricks[[1]](#footnote-1).

# Why the Work Matters

Do you have a coherent and effective district and school assessment system to complements and enhances instruction? Does it serve student, teacher, administrator, and policymaker needs, and with good balance?

Was the system designed so that teachers, principals, and administrators share power in service of providing students the best possible education? Or does the collection of tests feel more like a collection of bricks than a well-designed house?

Does each test have a clear and appropriate purpose? Are these purposes clearly understood? Agreed to by all parties? Are current uses appropriate to the test purposes? Is it clear what uses are appropriate, and which are not for data from each test? Does it feel like some tests will crumble under the weight of use?

Are some tests given by tradition without a clear understanding of why? Do you experience “system creep,” with new tests added but old ones rarely dropped? Are test data actually used when they become available? Are tests used for new purposes without explicit attention to whether the new uses are appropriate?

Are the tests (taken as a set) coherent, or do tests prescribed by the state, district, school, or the classroom teacher conflict with each other in timing, content standards, or results?

Does it feel like, overall, testing disrupts rather than facilitates instruction?

If at least some of this sounds familiar, you are decidedly not alone. You can improve your situation by intentionally and thoughtfully designing an assessment system. But designing, implementing, and maintaining a coherent district and school assessment system is challenging work. It requires the will to work together across all levels in the district.

It requires time for a team of district and school representatives to intentionally consider their most important instructional and assessment purposes, and to design a system that supports those purposes. Maintaining a system over time requires clear policies that refer back to the purposes of the assessment system, and periodically, the time and effort to keep the system coherent and useful. This is needed to ensure that the design of the assessment system evolves intentionally to meet changing needs, without continuing to hold on to components that are no longer useful or necessary.

It is not easy work. But it is important. The reason it is important is that when there is a sound assessment system in place, students get information they need to improve their own learning, classroom educators get the information they need to monitor and respond to student learning long before learning is evaluated, school leaders get the information they need to focus their resources, and the district office gets the information it needs to evaluate and improve district programs and resource targeting.

# What the DASD Toolkit Is and Is Not

The Toolkit is intended to provide a structure for a team of district and school personnel to have the difficult conversations, in a principled manner, that are necessary to design a district assessment system. It walks a district design team through the process over a set of meetings and provides the district with design documents.

The Toolkit materials stop at the completion of the design process. While it does provide some documents that can help the district plan implementation, implementation is another process that requires additional effort, from selecting or designing assessments to meet each need identified in the design process to providing professional learning opportunities and other support to various stakeholders in the system (e.g., district leaders, district central office staff, school leaders, and teachers).

# Issues the DASD Toolkit is Designed to Address

Several issues that must be addressed in designing a coherent and useful district assessment system. Based on conversations among some of the author team, some key issues are identified in Table 1 below. The Toolkit is intended to address those issues.

Table 1. Addressing challenges and needs in the toolkit.

| Challenge | Associated Need | How the Need is Addressed in the Toolkit |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Limited Utility | Address conflicting needs within a single system | By including all key district stakeholder roles in the process. |
| Poor Assessment  Literacy | Basic assessment literacy | By developing a shared, consistent, and coherent assessment vocabulary necessary for designing a district assessment system. |
| Poor Assessment Use Literacy | Basic assessment use literacy | By developing shared, consistent, and comprehensive, shared, coherent vocabulary around assessment purposes and uses, and identifying the types and characteristics of assessment(s) appropriate for each use/purpose. |
| Parsimony | A system that minimizes duplication (and thus the amount time devoted to formal test taking) | By using a disciplined process to identify a prioritized set of uses and purposes. This is followed by (for each purpose/use) the smallest set of assessments that can adequately fulfill those needs. This may be reflected in tweaks to, considerable modification of, or wholesale replacement of an existing system. |
| Incoherence | A system in which various components form a coherent whole to create a comprehensive and balanced set of information about each student’s achievement | By attending to coherence throughout the disciplined design process. |
| Power Boundaries | A system in which educators share power and collaborate across all levels in the system (from the classroom to the district superintendent and school board) | By attending to power sharing and power differentials through the disciplined design process. |
| Implementation  and Maintenance  of an Assessment  System | A plan for implementing the system that attends to potential hurdles and protects against *ad hoc* modifications to the system | By using a disciplined process that identifies anticipated hurdles from all stakeholders’ perspectives. This includes near-term barriers to implementation and a plan for addressing them. It also provides a strong set of design documents that can serve as a foundation for ongoing evaluation of the sufficiency of the system and for evaluating (1) whether existing assessments should be continued as is, (2) whether and how they may need to be modified, and (3) whether and how any new proposed assessments would fit into the overall system. |

# What a District Invests

The Toolkit is not a “silver bullet.” It requires commitment from district leadership to invest in, support, and follow up on the work of a small Facilitation Team and a larger Design Team. The investment comes in the following forms:

* Procuring the services of an External Facilitator who is also a measurement expert.
* Materials, food, and facilities to host three six-hour design workshops.
* Time for the members of the Facilitation Team to prepare for and conduct the three workshops and to follow up on homework assigned in advance of each workshop.
* Time for all members of the Design Team to do pre-workshop homework and attend each of the three workshops.

Detailed information on who might serve on the Facilitation Team and the Design Team is given in Appendix A starting on page 5.

# What a District Gets in Return for Its Investment

Upon conclusion, the External Facilitator and District Liaison will deliver to the Project Champion a package containing the following:

* A summary of the existing assessments used in the district.
* A document describing the Design Team’s proposed district assessment system design.
* A report describing how the team created the final design.
* A document describing potential barriers to implementation with associated strategies to address them.

These deliverables will both document why the system was set up the way it was and serve as a baseline for returning to as the system evolves. Returning to this new baseline can help the district ensure that the evolution continues to be intentional, coherent, and balances the needs of various stakeholders.

This investment will give the district a strong baseline from which to begin the real work: implementation. To assist with implementation, the district may desire additional follow-up meetings with the External Facilitator to review progress in implementing and improving the system. The External Facilitator may be able to provide expertise on difficult issues and an independent viewpoint not constrained by living within existing district systems.

# Appendix A

## Who Might Serve on the *Facilitation Team* and *Design Team*?

As noted above, there is a small Project Leadership Team and a larger District Design Team that will do the work of designing the district assessment system.

### Members of the *Facilitation Team*

There are four key project leadership roles necessary to make the district assessment system design process successful. They are:

* External Facilitator
* Project Champion
* District Liaison
* Meeting Coordinator

External Facilitator. This person is responsible for leading the work of the Project Leadership Team by leading planning meetings with the District Liaison and Meeting Coordinator, advising the District Liaison as needed, and incorporating completed homework assignments from workshops 1 and 2 into workshop 2 and 3 materials. She is also responsible for facilitating the three workshops and completing and delivering project deliverables along the way and at the end of the project.

She also needs strong facilitation skills, specifically in the areas of eliciting full participation from quiet or introverted members of the district Design Team, helping members to identify common ground with priorities appear to be in conflict, and ceding the floor when the team’s work is on target and timely. She also needs the ability to understand and navigate difficult policy issues in K-12 education and to understand the different needs of teachers, school leaders, district central office staff, and district leadership.

She also needs professional expertise in assessment *FOR* learning (*formative* assessment); professional expertise in assessment *OF* learning (*interim* and *summative* assessment); and professional expertise in assessment at the classroom, school/district, state, and national levels.

Finally, it is important to use an *external* facilitator for two reasons. First and foremost, if there is a district employee who fits this description, their knowledge and abilities is too important as a fully participating member of the Design Team or as the District Liaison on the Facilitation Team. Second, it is important to have an independent, external perspective to identify and work around potential blind spots.

Project Champion.This person authorizes the work and supports the project by coordinating with the External Facilitator and District Liaison to develop a project vision, attending the first hour of workshop #1 to articulate the vision and charge the Design Team with fulfilling its part of the vision, meeting briefly with the District Liaison and External Facilitator for a progress report after each workshop, supporting and encouraging the work of the Facilitation Team and Design Team, and attending the last hour of workshop #3 to receive an oral report from the Design Team.

This person should be a member of senior district leadership (e.g., District Superintendent, Deputy Superintendent) or have the authority to speak for senior district leadership regarding the work of designing a district assessment system. She should also have a fully understanding of the resources necessary for a successful outcome and be committed to expending those resources. She should be willing to spend the necessary time with the District Liaison to identify and recruit an External Facilitator, a Meeting Coordinator, and members of the Design Team. Finally, she should be willing to spend the time to attend the first hour of the first workshop, and attend the last hour of the third workshop, and receive brief progress reports after each workshop.

District Liaison. This person holds the key district role in the success of the project. She works closely with the Project Champion to identify and procure the services of an External Facilitator, identify and assign a Meeting Coordinator, identify and recruit potential members of the Design Team, brief the Project Champion on progress with the External Facilitator after each workshop, and advocate with the Project Champion for needed support and/or resources.

This person also works closely with the External Facilitator by serving as the facilitator’s point of contact; sharing information about the district’s structure, culture, and context; assisting in planning and preparing for each workshop, supporting the External Facilitator by watching for and communicating issues as they arise during the workshops, and synthesizing homework of the District Design Team and providing it to the External Facilitator in a timely manner so that they can be incorporated into the next workshop’s materials.

This person also works closely with the Meeting Coordinator by inviting her to participate in workshop planning meetings and reviewing meeting logistics as identified by the coordinator.

Finally, this person coordinates the work of the Design Team by serving as a fully-participating member of the team, listening for team members’ concerns and either resolving them or bringing them to the attention of the External Facilitator, and identifying whether there is an opportunity and/or need for participants to receive professional development credit for participation (and if so, ensuring that the proper structure is in place). She also distributes pre-workshop materials in a timely manner, communicate expectations for homework to be completed in advance of workshops, monitoring and coordinating completion of homework in advance of workshops, and providing completed and synthesized homework to the External Facilitator sufficiently in advance of workshops to be incorporated into workshop materials.

This person also needs to have the trust of the Project Champion, have the trust of the District Design Team members; have a very strong understanding of the differing needs of teachers, school leaders, district central office staff, and district leadership; and be a district employee that is the closest to having the attributes an External Facilitator needs.

Meeting Coordinator. This person is responsible for attending planning meetings to track any logistical needs, such as meeting rooms, tables, meals, snacks, beverages, ensure that IT needs are met (e.g., screen projection and internet access), and printing and packaging workshop participant packets. She is also responsible for coordinating and monitoring the logistics needed for participants to earn professional development credits (if applicable) and for reimbursements, if applicable.

#### Transferring Leadership from the External Facilitator to the District Liaison

Two of the External Facilitator’s roles are to be the measurement expert and to allow the District Liaison to fully participate and contribute his or her expertise in the workshops. However, it is important that when the design work is completed, the district have a person that can facilitate continuing work.

The intent is that in the first workshop, the District Liaison will be fully engaged as a participant among peers, as a backup to the External Facilitator in the second workshop, and as the primary facilitator in the third workshop (supported by the External Facilitator). Even so, it may be that in the subsequent work of implementing the district assessment system design, the district will benefit from additional help from the External Facilitator in a consulting role.

### Members of the District Design Team

It is important that various roles within the district be represented on a broad team of participants beyond the Facilitation Team. This is necessary for two reasons: (1) to ensure that the work addresses the needs of various roles within the district and (2) to allow for the team to discuss and negotiate varying needs in the design process.

District Office Representatives. A potential list of district representatives is provided below, with the caveat that not every role is available in every district or that it may not be feasible for some district central office roles to be represented.

* Superintendent or designee
* School board member
* Assessment director
* Curriculum director
* Title I director
* English learner director
* Special education director
* Education technology director
* Instructional coach

School Leadership Representatives. School leadership representatives should include leaders from all levels in the district (e.g., elementary, middle, and high school). The External Facilitator will work with the District Liaison to ensure that the work of the teams maintains both (1) coherence across grade levels, and (2) flexibility for appropriate differences across levels. A potential list of school leadership representatives is provided below, with the caveat that not every role may be available.

* Principal
* Assistant principal
* School counselor
* Instructional coach
* Department heads
* Teacher leaders

Classroom Teacher Representatives. Teacher representatives should include teachers from all levels in the district (e.g., elementary, middle, and high school). A potential list of classroom representative is provided below, with the caveat that not every role may be available.

* Grade level teachers
* Subject area teachers
* Title I teacher
* English learner teacher
* Special education teacher

Parent Representatives. It may be appropriate to select a small number of reasonably knowledgeable parents to participate on the Design Team.

#### Selecting District Design Team Members

It is important to have enough team members to adequately represent the needs of all affected roles in the district central office, school leadership, and classroom teachers. At the same time, it is important to have a team that is small enough to come to consensus over the period of three workshops. The Project Champion and the District Liaison will need to balance these needs to identify and recruit Design Team members.

1. See Coladarci (2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)