The Influence of Politics and Policy on Balanced Assessment Systems

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Political Boundaries and Balanced Assessment Systems

- **Coherence**
  - Learning targets
  - Curriculum
  - Design specifications
    - Format, items

- **Comprehensiveness**
  - Issues of implementation
    - timing and format
  - Who are the stakeholders?
  - Resources

- **Continuity**
  - Information flow
  - What is building on what?

- **Efficiency**
  - Trying to avoid being overrun by too many assessments

- **Utility**
  - For whom?
  - How?
  - Based on what theory of action?
Coherence Requires Coordination
The Challenge

• Balanced assessment system design and implementation is hard in the best of conditions
• The challenges are exacerbated when the various assessments are owned by different political entities
  – Issues of local control and the role of learning targets and curriculum
  – Turnover and shifting priorities
  – State accountability policies
• Most discussions of balanced assessment systems focus on technical and mechanical issues, but policy and politics are a linchpin!
Range of state-local control of education

Figure ES-1: Which states vest authority at the state—or local—level?

More Local

Range of Authority

More State

Local Level  State Level

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Learning targets & curriculum: implications for coherence

Coherence depends on tight connections among curriculum, assessment, and instruction.

Shepard, 2000
Learning targets & curriculum: implications for coherence

State Content Standards

Reformed Vision of Curriculum

Cognitive & Constructivist Learning Theories

Classroom Assessment

District Assessment

State Assessment

How do these pieces fit?
Content standards are not enough to support coherence!

Shepard, 2000

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Turnover: Coherence requires stability!

- Changing visions of education
- Four (4) different state tests in 5 years? Not a joke!
- Changing or threatening to change standards (CCSS)!

All affect the implementation of balanced assessment systems, whether state- or district-led.
• I focus on two main policy considerations:
  – The influence of state accountability policies
  – The footprint of state assessments
The Perverse Effects of High Stakes Accountability

Stakes, if they work at all, do so by mobilizing resources, capacities, knowledge, and competencies that, by definition are not present in the organization and individuals whom they are intended to affect. If the schools had the assets in advance of the stakes, they presumably would not need the stakes to mobilize them. In this context, stakes make no sense as policy instruments unless they are joined in some systematic way with assistance that is designed to create the organizational assets that are required to respond to the stakes. In the absence of this kind of assistance, most schools and systems will respond within the constraints of their existing assets, which are, by definition, inadequate to respond to the task (Elmore, 2004, p.288).
Policy chaos

- If the state employs high stake accountability policies, districts and schools will have a hard time implementing balanced local assessment systems.

Such policies tend to suck the air out of the room and control the conversations!
State accountability and assessment policies can have a crushing influence on classroom assessment systems.
What’s the right balance?

• Should states use very light footprint assessments to reduce the impression of the state tests?
• Should the state use the state assessment to send important signals about expectations for teaching and learning?
• Of course, there are some middle-ground approaches, such as matrix sampling
What can we do?

• Focus where we can focus…
  – Building district capacity to create high quality systems of assessment
  – Working from the classroom out

• Loose-coupling from the state to district
• Tight-coupling within districts
How do we deal with these challenges?

• Which entity (or entities) has to address the challenges of coherence and comprehensiveness?

• What is the most appropriate role for states in supporting balanced assessment systems?

• How can districts fend off onerous state accountability policies?

• Can a high quality classroom assessment system operate in a bubble? Why or why not? How?