What's a Leader to Do? State and District Leaders' Roles in Supporting Local Assessment Systems

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Reidy Interactive Lecture Series

Nashua, NH October 5-6, 2006

1

Questions

- Can/should state leaders play a role in formative/classroom/interim assessment decisions?
  - Can they help?
  - Can they mess it up?
- Can/should district leaders play a role in formative/classroom/interim assessment decisions?
  - Can they help?
  - Can they mess it up?
- What are some differences in the roles of the leaders at the two levels?

Three Broad Areas of State and District Action

- Determining the most sensible implementation strategy for the given context

- Building policy structures that support the use of reform-based local assessments

- Creating and fostering professional learning
  - The last two should follow the implementation strategy

Implementation Considerations

- Philosophical and conceptual views of formative and/or interim assessment

- Capacity issues

- Both categories need to be considered when thinking about which approach to implement and how to increase the likelihood of success

Example of implementation decision

The role of curriculum:

- Formative assessments must be embedded in rich curriculum in order to bring about meaningful learning

OR

- Formative assessments can serve as a lever for reform independent of curriculum

- We're not looking for a "right" answer, but states and districts need to be clear about this up front

Models/Dimensions of Formative and Interim Assessment

- What will be common/standardized, at what level?

- The role of the teacher?

- Reactive or proactive?

- Grain-size and specificity

- Equity/excellence group goals

What Gets Standardized By Level?

- Which aspects are standardized/common at the district and state levels and which vary?
  - Ends
    - Content standards
    - Proficiency requirements
  - Means
    - Curriculum
    - Instruction
    - Interim assessment
    - Formative assessment
    - Program evaluation (data analysis) and needs planning

The Role of the Teacher

- As standardization increases, teachers have less control over ends and perhaps means
- What is your vision of the teacher in terms of formative and interim assessment?
  - Teacher as artistic coach, relying on inventive expertise to shape free-flowing individual situations, often beyond the limited state standards
  - Teacher as scientist, drawing on carefully researched learning trajectories, cognitive science of learning (misconceptions), and tools such as technically sound assessment item banks (and diagnostician vs. treatment)
  - Teacher as data consumer, using programs controlled out of the classroom (e.g., district) to gather data regarding students' knowledge and skills

Who is the Learner?

- Who gets and uses the information and what is the timeframe for providing this information?
- <u>Near term—short cycle (Wiliam)</u>
  - Teacher to learn about current students (individuals/group)
  - Student to learn content and skills
  - Student to learn about learning strategies (metacognition)
  - Student to learn about other students
- <u>Not immediate—medium cycle (Wiliam)</u>
  - Teacher to learn about curriculum
  - Teacher to learn about pedagogy
  - Administrators to learn about instruction, curriculum, and programs
  - Parents to learn about student and school

Reactive or Proactive?

- How do you think formative or other local assessment relates to instruction cycle?
  - Primarily **before** instruction to diagnose strength of understanding of a topic to inform upcoming instruction
  - Primarily **during** instruction to set pacing, strengthen motivation and relations ("Good job!") and therefore to assist with management of learning (not alter the content)
  - Primarily **during** instruction to diagnose and evaluate how well students are developing appropriate understandings of content/skills to perhaps adjust focus of instruction and curriculum
  - Primarily **after** instruction to diagnose "what students did not yet get" and therefore to inform remedial instruction

Grain-size and Specificity

- This relates to several of the presentations we heard earlier:
- To direct learning, we need to be clear about goals and purposes:
  - Learning progressions and views of how "expertise" or proficiency develops
  - The format (e.g., raw student work or score reports) and specificity of the resulting information
    - What is the grain size necessary useful for promoting learning?
- Necessary grain-size and specificity differ by level and thereby affect implementation decisions

Equity/Excellence Goals for Group

- What is your ideal distribution of students after effective instruction?
  - Distribution of students is higher, but about as wide from "top" to "bottom" students (minimum is all students proficient)
  - Distribution of students is much narrower (minimum is all students proficient and absolute achievement gap is narrowed)
  - Distribution of students is wider (minimum all students proficient) and knowledge is more individualized
- How do these different views affect implementation considerations?

Capacity Issues

- Curriculum
- Current level of understanding
- Professional development
- Resources

Curriculum Capacity

- Will the current curriculum support rich learning and formative assessment opportunities or is formative assessment seen as the lever to change curriculum?

Start From Where They Are

- Current level of understanding
  - What are teachers' and leaders' understanding of things such as standards-based education, learning theory, and content?
  - Is the ground fertile for moving to a rich model of formative assessment or would some interim assessment strategies be a more appropriate place to start?

Professional Development

- How much time is available for professional development and how is such time structured?

- What is the leadership (including teacher leaders) available to support the professional learning?

- Is appropriate expertise available to lead or advise the reform initiative?

Resources

- What financial resources are available to support the assessment reform initiative?
  - New resources
  - Reallocation of existing resources
- While budgets are only written for a year or two at a time, the costs for a formative and/or interim assessment initiative extend over many years
  - Classroom-based formative assessment strategies require a significant commitment of professional development resources
  - Interim assessment systems might require more up-front costs and less over time (but we'd argue that to do things right, these still require substantial PD costs)

States and Districts can…

- Provide policy support for local assessments
- Support and structure professional learning opportunities to foster successful implementation

Additional Action Areas for Districts

- Establishing curriculum (including materials)
- Building professional learning opportunities and communities
  - Creating a professional development calendar
- Establishing a culture of inquiry and reflection
- Ensuring high quality instructional leadership at the building level

State & District Policy Considerations

- Philosophical leadership—setting the vision
  - Standards and curriculum
- Funding and other resources
- Consistency of interventions
- State assessment design decisions
- Accountability policies
- Supporting and leading professional development

Establishing the Vision

- State & district leaders should be clear about their vision for learning, instruction, assessment, and school quality
- State & district leaders should then work to ensure philosophical consistency among various initiatives and policies

It Starts With the Standards

- Most state leaders have the authority to craft the content and performance standards that serve as the foundation for most assessment activities
  - Most state content standards are NOT designed using research on learning
  - But, they should do so in ways that can support meaningful learning
- District leaders have little direct role here except through committee membership and to perhaps supplement state standards, particularly in content other than reading, math, and science

The State's Role in Curriculum

- Debate among formative assessment researchers regarding the degree to which formative assessment activities should be embedded in rich curriculum

- Little debate about the importance of curriculum, but few states outside of the Southeast have little say over curriculum

- It will take some political capital to move this discussion in some states, but I argue it is worth pursuing
  - Research foundation
  - Efficiency

The District's Role in Curriculum

- On the other hand, district leaders almost always have direct control of curriculum decisions

- Embedding formative assessment activities in rich curriculum will increase the likelihood of student learning

- When making curriculum decisions, district leaders should consider curricula that are philosophically and theoretically consistent with the learning and formative assessment goals being promoted

Consistency and Sustainability

- As part of this vision, both state and district leaders can focus and prioritize all the things schools are asked/required to do

- Avoid hopping from one reform to the next
  - "This too shall pass"

- In the *rare case* that the state does not get it right, the district leaders can structure programs and policies to try to keep schools focused on the most important outcomes

State Resources

- Money matters!
- State leaders create legislative funding priorities and requests
- These requests operationalize the state's educational values and vision
- It is not just money—can reallocate existing resources to support formative and other local assessment initiatives

District Resources

- Generally districts do not have the same access to resources as the state, but district leaders have considerable flexibility over certain spending decisions

- If leveraged appropriately, these funding decisions can exercise tremendous influence

  - Example, Park County, WY

The large-scale assessment

- The state assessment is one of the most visible programs run by any state DOE
- It is particularly important for the influence it can have over "formative" assessment practices
- More reform oriented designs can signal to the field about the types of learning outcomes and tasks that are valued

District response to state tests

- Recognizing the tremendous pressure to raise test scores to meet AYP, district leaders have considerable leeway in how they approach this goal
  - Test preparation activities and worksheet approaches might raise scores, but many argue that they do not promote the learning goals consistent with those suggested by advocates of formative assessment
  - On the other hand, formative approaches designed to promote deep understanding of (perhaps) fewer concepts will most likely lead to high end-of-year scores

Accountability Policies

- The types of inputs and outputs that get included in school and/or district accountability can have tremendous repercussions throughout the system
  - Many of these policies, e.g., NCLB, can hinder reform-based assessment practices
  - However, state policies—e.g., WY and RI—can direct attention and efforts toward improving local assessment practices

State Support of Professional Development

- Through resource decisions, vision, and intellectual leadership, the state office can both support—e.g., flow through—and lead professional development efforts

- Some might argue about the quality of state (or contractor)-led PD, but district-purchased consulting services often reveals tremendous inequalities across districts

District Support of Professional Development

- No matter how active a role the state takes, the majority of professional development decisions should and do take place at the district level

- Too often, district professional development programs lack focus and sustainability

- Professional development to support formative and other strong classroom assessment/instruction practices requires serious attention to effective PD models
  - Mentoring, focus, sustainability, modeling

Professional Learning

- A tremendous need for professional development related to learning and assessment reforms

- Overheard… "we need to reform teacher education" to address this need

- Teacher education programs cannot meet this need (they can help) because of the contextual nature of the knowledge needed

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 and district leadership is key to supporting meaningful assessment and learning in classrooms
  - Many district leaders have expressed that one of their biggest challenges is effective building leadership

Assessment-instruction interaction

- What is the mechanism for turning an assessment result—broadly speaking—into a useful instructional action?

- With all of the claims for the instructional benefits for a variety of assessments—value-added, benchmarks, formative—we see little attention to the black box by which teachers are supposed turn these results into a teachable action

Assessment Literacy?

- This term gets used often to capture the professional development needs to improve teachers' assessment knowledge and skills
- It is more important to focus on increasing instructional literacy
  - Pedagogical content knowledge
  - How people learn
  - Deep understanding of content
- And yes, teachers need to learn how to select/create meaningful assessment activities, but is that enough…
  - Analyzing the lemonade task

Two Models of PD

- State-led PD program
  - Standards-based schools institutes
- Initiatives to support policy requirements

Standards-based schools institutes

- Loosely based on Wiggins and McTigue
  - The "unit" plan
- 9 days throughout the year
  - Design, try-out, review student work
- School teams only
  - PD for both teachers and leaders
  - Specific PD designed to assist principals become assessment/instructional leaders in their schools
- Effectiveness—change in familiarity concepts and use of tools

Wyoming's Graduation System

- Confluence of policy support and professional development initiatives
- Focused on multiple levels of the system
  - Peer review of system criteria
    - District and school leaders along with a few teachers
  - BOE consortium
    - Teachers and a few school leaders
      - Task development project
      - WY Consortium's move to instructional/assessment coaches
      - Learning from the best teachers
- Most powerful reform I've ever experienced
  - Based on "real" work