

Understanding Assessment Culture

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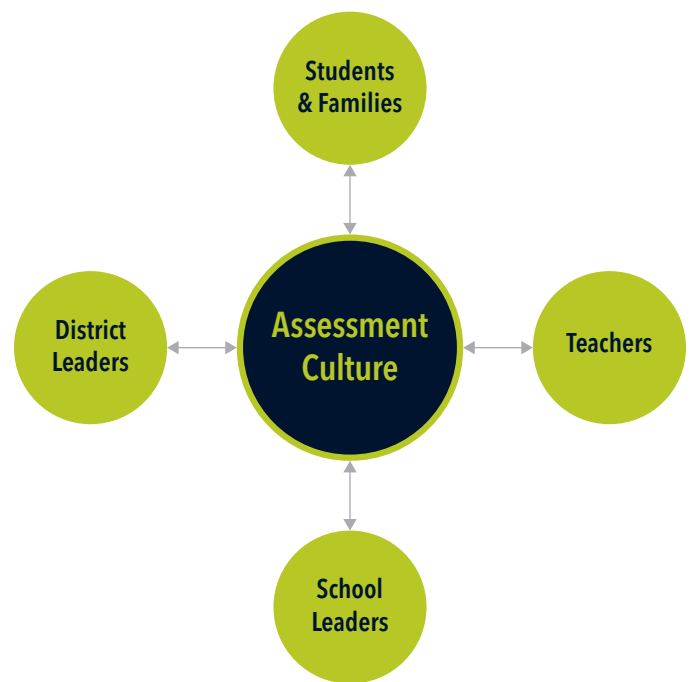
UNDERSTANDING ASSESSMENT CULTURE

How do attitudes and beliefs about assessment affect teaching and learning in your school? This document is intended to help school and district leaders understand these dynamics. While it is not designed for use as a step-by-step toolkit to support evaluation, this document does provide a foundation for leaders to learn more about their school or district's assessment culture.

What Is Assessment Culture?

"Assessment culture" refers to the underlying attitudes, beliefs, and expectations that students, educators, leaders and the broader community have about assessment at a given time.

Assessment is the process of collecting evidence of student learning. Assessment can take many forms depending on the type of information needed and the decisions to be made with that information.¹ But in all cases, the goal is to understand the learning of individuals or groups of students.



Why Does Assessment Culture Matter?

Because a school's assessment culture can shape—directly or indirectly—how well assessment practices support teaching and learning.

The assessment culture simultaneously influences and is influenced by the attitudes, beliefs, values, and actions of the various actors in an educational system (see figure above). These actors play distinct roles that each inform what assessments are administered and when, and how results are interpreted and used.

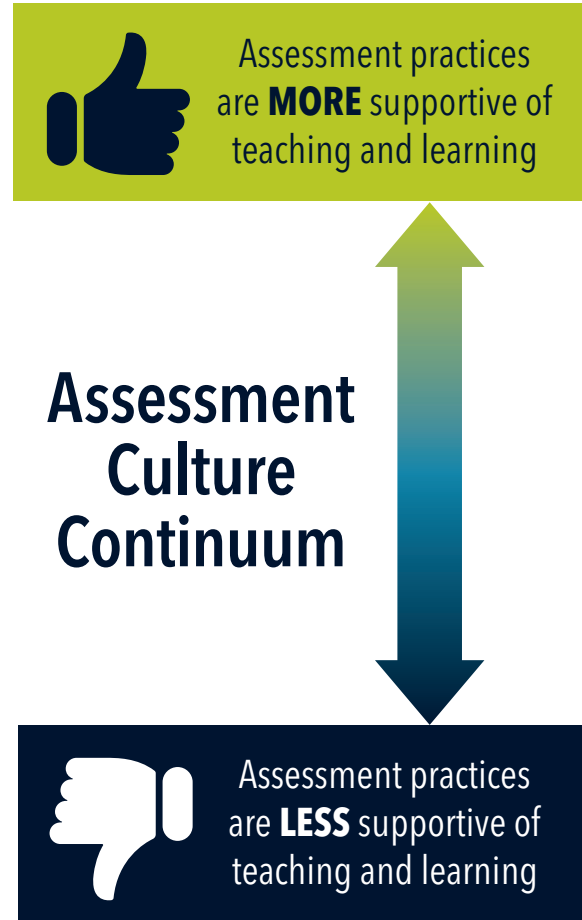
Given the significant impact different types and uses of assessment can have on teachers, students and schools (e.g., influencing the structure and pacing of instruction, grading, differentiation, promotion/retention, evaluating school quality), it's important to understand the various actors' roles and the potential influence of assessment culture on assessment practice.

1. Wylie, E. C., & Landl, E. (2024). *A common language for discussing the goals, characteristics and components of balanced assessment systems*. Council of Chief State School Officers. <https://753a0706.flowpaper.com/CCSSOBASCommonLanguage/>

What Makes Up Assessment Culture?

A school or district's assessment culture can be understood by examining:²

- **Purpose and values:** How students, teachers, leaders, and community perceive the purpose, value, and role of assessment.
- **Beliefs and assumptions:** the beliefs and assumptions that teachers, leaders, students, and families have about the quality and appropriate use of assessment tools and practices.
- **Organizational structures:** The structures within a school that support the development, selection, analysis, or evaluation of assessments and their results (e.g., common planning time, professional learning, decision making and communicating structures).
- **Rituals and routines:** The activities school communities engage in to prepare for assessment or analyze assessment results.
- **Symbols and stories:** the tangible markers, comments, lore, and discussions about assessment that students, teachers and leaders regularly see, hear, or tell.
- **Feedback systems:** The procedures or activities used to monitor teacher or student performance or progress, with the goal of providing feedback that informs improvement, decision-making, or the adjustment of teaching/learning strategies. These systems can lead to assumptions about "the way things are done around here."



Why a *Continuum* of Assessment Culture?

A school's assessment culture will be represented in the actions and beliefs of its students, educators, and leaders. Some of the adults in the system may engage in practices known to support teaching and learning, while others bring experiences and beliefs about assessment that negatively affect assessment performance or use. For this reason, it is not useful to think of a school's assessment culture as good or bad. It's best to think of it as a continuum of practices that are more/less supportive of teaching and learning.

2. Assessment culture draws on the broader school culture literature: Harrison, C. J., Könings, K. D., Schuwirth, L. W., Wass, V., & Van der Vleuten, C. P. (2017). Changing the culture of assessment: The dominance of the summative assessment paradigm. *BMC medical education*, 17(1), 1-14. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1186/s12909-017-0912-5>; Hinde, Elizabeth R. (2005) "School Culture and Change: An Examination of the Effects of School Culture on the Process of Change," *Essays in Education*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 5. Available at: <https://openriver.winona.edu/eie/vol12/iss1/5>; Jerald, C. D. (2006). School culture. Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement. Available at: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED495013.pdf>

The tables below illustrate three aspects of assessment culture. For each, we've included a pair of statements that describe opposite ends of the continuum—from practices that are less to more supportive of teaching and learning—as represented by the actions and beliefs of students, teachers or school/district leaders. We encourage readers to consider the pairs of statements together, since understanding one end of the continuum can inform your understanding of the other. Below the statement pair is a brief, evidence-based explanation for why this aspect of assessment culture is important to consider. The appendix provides the full set of 21 pairs of statements with evidence explanations.

From <i>less supportive of teaching and learning</i>	TO <i>more supportive of teaching and learning</i>
Students and families view assessment results as confirmation of whether students are smart or not.	Students and families view assessment results as an opportunity to identify students' strengths and areas for growth.

Explanation: Students who are supported to develop a growth mindset are better equipped to tackle challenging work, deal with learning setbacks and have agency over their learning.^[1] Using formative assessment practices in particular as a tool for learning can help foster this growth mindset in students. In addition, there are positive relationships between students' sense of the value of assessment, their self-efficacy, goal orientation and learning outcomes.

From <i>less supportive of teaching and learning</i>	TO <i>more supportive of teaching and learning</i>
School and district leaders provide assessment-related professional learning opportunities that are limited in scope or focus primarily on test administration and understanding of reports.	School and district leaders provide ongoing, assessment-related professional learning opportunities that prioritize assessment literacy, formative assessment practices, and classroom summative assessment, with a focus on using evidence of learning to inform instruction.

Explanation: It is insufficient to provide teachers with training only on interpreting summative assessment data and assessment preparation rather than taking a broader focus on effective formative assessment practices. Effective principals encourage teacher collaboration on curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Further, research on the negative implications of high-stakes testing suggests that focusing professional development on a particular test event, rather than best practices for classroom assessments, could lead educators, students and others to misinterpret its value and appropriateness as a tool for instruction, increase test anxiety and reduce student engagement, and negatively impact educators' job satisfaction.

From <i>less supportive of teaching and learning</i>	TO <i>more supportive of teaching and learning</i>
Teachers or school leaders make little or no attempt to select or develop assessments that reflect the diversity that students bring to the classroom, in the narratives used and the ways students see themselves and others portrayed.	Teachers and leaders select or develop assessments that reflect the diversity that students bring to the classroom, in the narratives used and the ways students see themselves and others portrayed.

Explanation: Research evidence demonstrates that seeing themselves, their families and cultures reflected in curriculum and assessment materials contributes to students' sense of belonging.

What Can a School Do to Improve Assessment Culture?

1. **Create an Assessment Culture Task Force.** Before any changes or responses can be implemented to modify a school's assessment culture, it's important to understand the current state of that culture, recognizing that people within it are not monolithic in their views. One approach is for school leadership to take on the steps described below. Alternatively, having a cross-functional task force (students, teachers, leaders, parents) can make the process more transparent. Having the group provide input on what evidence to collect and how to review and make sense of that information will develop trust in the process. Task force members could begin by reading and discussing the pairs of assessment culture statements in the appendix to identify areas of strength and opportunities for growth within their school or district. The task force could then extend the perspectives on assessment culture by collecting additional evidence.
2. **Collect information to help evaluate and understand your school's assessment culture.** To collect the kinds of evidence outlined in the pairs of assessment culture statements provided in this document, schools could:
 - a. Survey students and the adults in the system about their views and beliefs related to assessment purpose and use, and the kinds of messages about assessment they perceive coming from school and district leaders
 - b. Conduct focus groups with students and parents to understand how they think about assessment and assessment results
 - c. Collect assessment artifacts to examine whether and how teachers use common rubrics, how assessment is communicated, or how assessment results are reviewed
 - d. Identify the kinds of assessment literacy training offered to teachers and leaders in the last two to three years
 - e. Review school assessment policies related to pacing, grading, assessment retakes etc
 - f. Examine school board minutes over the past year to identify assessment related discussions and decisions.
3. **Review and analyze information.** The task force should review all the evidence collected and focus on contradictory viewpoints or stances. This could reveal how/where perceptions or understandings of assessment differ significantly across groups and/or relative to documented policies. The task force should create a set of big-picture takeaways to share with everyone who participated in the initial data collection for validation and feedback.
4. **Create an action plan.** The action plan will vary depending on the findings from step #3. In some cases, there may be broad school culture or communication issues that need to be addressed before assessment issues can be directly tackled. In other cases, assessment challenges may have been identified that can be addressed directly (through improved assessment literacy, professional learning or a coordinated assessment audit, for example) in a way that serves both to address the issue and to positively affect assessment and school culture (e.g., by making the culture more collaborative, transparent and interdisciplinary). Alternatively, the plan may focus on improving one aspect of assessment culture perceived as a high priority for the school, such as changing perceptions of the state summative assessment. Regardless of scope, the action plan must specify the problem to be addressed and how progress will be evaluated.



APPENDIX: Statements Representing Opposite Ends of the Assessment Culture Continuum

<i>Less supportive of teaching and learning</i>	<i>More supportive of teaching and learning</i>	Explanation
Students perceive classroom assessment as primarily a teacher-driven activity, done to them rather than with them.	Students perceive classroom assessment as a shared activity that empowers students to be partners in learning with the teacher.	Self-regulation occurs when students set goals, monitor their own learning and take action to move closer to their goals. Self-regulated learners tend to be more effective learners. ^[i] When students do not view assessment as a process that gives them insight into their own learning processes and status they are less likely to adopt self-regulating behaviors.
Students and families view assessment results as confirmation of whether they are smart or not.	Students and families view assessment results as an opportunity to identify strengths and areas for growth that they can use to think about how to improve.	Students who are supported to develop a growth mindset are better equipped to tackle challenging work, deal with learning setbacks and have agency over their learning. ^[ii] Using formative assessment practices in particular as a tool for learning can help foster this growth mindset in students. In addition, there are positive relationships between students' sense of the value of assessment, their self-efficacy, goal orientation and learning outcomes. ^[iii]
Teachers predominantly assess student learning with multiple-choice classroom summative assessments that only include item types that tightly parallel item types used on the state summative assessments.	Teachers use multiple types of assessment (written, oral, performance, etc.) to gain insights into student learning.	To develop understanding of student thinking, teachers need to give students opportunities to make that thinking visible or audible and observe what students write, say, make or do. This requires multiple types of assessment. Multiple-choice items, while efficient, are the least likely to illuminate student thinking and reasoning. ^[iv]
Teachers view assessment and grading as tools to control student behavior ("if I don't grade it, they won't do it").	Teachers view assessment and grading as tools that support dialogue about student learning with students and parents/guardians.	There are ways to design grading practices so that they are equitable and support improved dialogue between educators, parents and students about learning. ^[v] These practices situate assessment as an invaluable tool to understand and monitor student learning, rather than a compliance activity.

Less supportive of teaching and learning	More supportive of teaching and learning	Explanation
<p>Teachers respond to assessment results from a fixed-mindset perspective (“there’s nothing I can do with these kids”) or demonstrate lack of surprise at certain students’ results, with little follow-up.</p>	<p>Teachers respond to assessment results with a growth-mindset perspective, using the assessment evidence to identify what students can do and identify next steps for students’ learning.</p>	<p>Research shows that teachers and students can display growth or fixed mindsets, and those ways of thinking impact student learning.^[vi] In addition, the collective teacher beliefs within a school about whether teachers can impact student learning can have a significant impact on learning outcomes.^[vii]</p>
<p>Walk-throughs or other forms of classroom observations tend to be more formal/summative, led by the principal or other school leaders, and emphasize adherence to a strict pacing guide (stifling opportunities for formative assessment practices).</p>	<p>Classroom walk-throughs or instructional rounds tend to be less formal/more formative, led by teachers and instructional leads, and emphasize research-based formative assessment practices aligned with teaching and learning.</p>	<p>Research on formative, peer observations in classrooms suggests that it can be beneficial both to the teachers being observed and those engaging in the observation. Feedback from peers is viewed as less threatening and supports teacher collaboration on instructional improvements.^[viii] In addition, effective principals focus on frequent, short classroom visits that allow for instructionally-focused feedback.^[ix]</p>
<p>Teachers or school leaders make little or no attempt to select or develop assessments that reflect the diversity that students bring to the classroom, in the narratives used and the ways students see themselves and others portrayed.</p>	<p>Teachers and leaders select or develop assessments that reflect the diversity that students bring to the classroom in the narratives used and the ways students see themselves and others portrayed.</p>	<p>Research evidence demonstrates that seeing themselves, their families and their cultures reflected in curriculum and assessment materials contributes to students’ sense of belonging.^[x]</p>
<p>Teachers and school leaders talk about student assessment results in a deficit-based way that focuses on what students lack, are doing wrong, or need to fix/change.</p>	<p>Teachers and school leaders talk about student assessment results in an asset-based way that focuses on what students can currently do and how to build on that to continue student learning.</p>	<p>Research shows that teachers and students can display growth or fixed mindsets, and those ways of thinking impact student learning.^[xi] In addition, the collective teacher belief within a school about whether teachers can impact student learning has a significant impact on learning outcomes.^[xii]</p> <p>In addition, the use of deficit-based language and labels can limit the educational opportunities that students are afforded (e.g., college prep coursework) by inadvertently biasing educators’ judgements about what students know and can do.^[xiii]</p>

Less supportive of teaching and learning	More supportive of teaching and learning	Explanation
<p>Teachers and school leaders do not value (or do not feel comfortable) sharing assessment results with peers to improve teaching and learning.</p>	<p>Teachers and school leaders promote efforts to share/discuss assessment results in grade-level, department or other meetings as a tool to discuss and improve teaching and learning (directly or indirectly).</p>	<p>Research on the development of expertise across professions emphasizes the importance of collaborative learning communities.[xiv] In education specifically, professional learning communities are sites for the collaborative examination of assessment evidence to then inform collective action to improve instructional practice.[xv]</p>
<p>Teachers and school leaders do not spend time evaluating or changing existing assessment tools and practices.</p>	<p>Teachers and school leaders are apt to embrace opportunities to evaluate or change existing assessment tools and practices.</p>	<p>One marker of effective school leadership is providing guidance and support for the collective commitment needed to foster improvement within the school.[xvi] One way in which this commitment can be enacted is through collaborative, periodic reviews of the assessment system. Furthermore, by not conducting periodic reviews, teachers and school leaders can perpetuate the use of historical assessments (even if they no longer align to the content standards or provide useful information), which works against local efforts to design coherent and efficient assessment systems.[xvii]</p>
<p>Teachers and leaders rarely discuss assessment data and only from the perspective of concern about state assessment results.</p>	<p>Teachers and leaders have regular opportunities to discuss the implications of assessment results in a way that meaningfully connects curriculum, instruction, and assessment.</p>	<p>An undue emphasis on improving summative assessment data can lead to narrowing of the curriculum, emphasizing only what will be assessed formally, limiting the use of ambitious teaching practices, and emphasizing test preparation. At its most extreme, it can result in cheating.[xviii]</p>
<p>School and district leaders do not trust teachers' professional judgment of student performance/mastery (e.g., test data always weighted more heavily in decisions than teacher classroom observations).</p>	<p>School and district leaders trust teachers' professional judgment of student performance/mastery (e.g., teacher classroom observations used to contextualize and/or provide balanced perspectives on test data).</p>	<p>Teacher professional judgments, like any human judgments, are fallible, but with professional collaborations teachers can calibrate their expectations for student performances that demonstrate grade-level understanding of the standards. When teachers use a wide range of assessment practices they are more able to have insights into student understanding. Test data provide a narrower perspective on student learning given test constraints. [xix]</p>

Less supportive of teaching and learning	More supportive of teaching and learning	Explanation
<p>School and district leaders share high-stakes assessment results in ways that facilitate ranking or comparing performance across students and classrooms in negative or punitive ways.</p>	<p>School and district leaders share high-stakes assessment results in ways that encourage discussion and focus productively on areas for systemic improvement (resource allocation, curriculum evaluation, professional learning opportunities).</p>	<p>Effective principals use data to promote “collaborative inquiry among teachers,” using multiple sources of data, and maintaining a productive problem-solving stance rather than engaging in conversation that locates blame on teachers or students.^[xxii]</p> <p>Methods that promote social comparison may be harmful to some students, resulting in negative thoughts and behaviors, low self esteem or depression.^[xxiii]</p>
<p>School or district leaders impose assessment decisions (e.g., what, when, why, how students should be tested) on teachers without consultation.</p>	<p>School or district leaders employ thoughtful, collaborative processes to make or evaluate local assessment decisions (e.g., what, when, why, how students should be tested).</p>	<p>While school and district leaders understand that they will ultimately have to make decisions about the running of a school or district, strong leaders understand the importance of collaboration and buy-in from others in the system. Often teacher leaders can serve as a bridge to help with broader decision-making and provide leaders with teacher insights.^[xxiv] This is also likely to improve the quality and coherence of the assessment system by ensuring that assessment decisions accurately reflect the information needed by educators to support student learning.</p>
<p>School and district leaders encourage the use of local assessments and assessment practices that focus predominantly on the skills, activities, and item types that students need to be successful on the state summative (or other high-stakes) assessments, narrowing assessment and curriculum.</p>	<p>School and district leaders encourage the use of local assessments and assessment practices that are coherent with teaching and learning, reflect a research-based view of how students learn, and allow students to demonstrate the depth and breadth of their learning in a variety of ways.</p>	<p>One of the negative aspects of annual accountability testing has been the narrowing of the curriculum and an overly tight alignment between the format of state assessments and what teachers use in the classroom. Effective leaders promote classroom assessment practices that align with a rich instructional vision that supports deep engagement with disciplinary content.^[xxv] Assessment decisions that put too much emphasis on the large-scale summative assessment are likely to work against local efforts to support balanced assessment systems.^[xxvi]</p>

Less supportive of teaching and learning	More supportive of teaching and learning	Explanation
<p>School and district leaders do not encourage the use of common planning time, provide tools/resources to support the interpretation and use of assessment results by different users, or establish systems and structures to share assessments and assessment practices among peers.</p>	<p>School and district leaders encourage the use of common planning time, provide resources/tools/convenings to support appropriate interpretation and use of assessment results by users, and establish structures to share assessments and assessment practices among teachers.</p>	<p>Effective principals understand the importance of teacher collaborative learning time and make it a priority to cultivate a school-wide climate of learning and trust. ^[xxix] In an assessment culture that is more supportive of teaching and learning, leaders should support teachers' asset-based use of assessment data to scaffold students' next learning steps on the foundation of what they currently know and can do. Supporting the appropriate interpretation of assessment information may entail teacher collaborations to gain multiple perspectives and the use of additional sources of evidence (e.g., student surveys or focus group information). ^[xxx]</p>
<p>School and district leaders provide teachers with assessment-related professional learning opportunities that are limited or focus primarily on summative test administration and understanding of reports.</p>	<p>School and district leaders provide teachers with on-going, assessment-related professional learning opportunities that prioritize assessment literacy, formative assessment, and classroom summative assessment, with a focus on using evidence of learning to inform teaching and learning.</p>	<p>It is insufficient to provide teachers with training only on interpreting summative assessment data and assessment preparation, rather than taking a broader focus on effective formative assessment practices. Effective principals encourage teacher collaboration on curriculum, instruction, and assessment. ^[xxvii] Further, research on the negative implications of high-stakes testing suggests that focusing professional development on a particular test event, rather than best practices for classroom assessments, could lead educators, students and others to misinterpret its value and appropriateness as a tool for instruction, increase test anxiety and reduce student engagement, and negatively impact educators' job satisfaction. ^[xxviii]</p>

Less supportive of teaching and learning	More supportive of teaching and learning	Explanation
<p>School and district leaders explicitly or implicitly encourage significant time to be spent on direct test preparation or testing pep rallies before major assessments.</p>	<p>School and district leaders explicitly communicate that preparation for state assessments be handled in a low-key way, meaningfully integrated into the curricular experience in a way that is neither disruptive nor time-consuming.</p>	<p>It is appropriate that students are prepared for major assessments: they should know the kinds of items or tasks they will experience, the length of the assessment, and the kinds of accessibility/accommodation tools that they will have access to. However, there is a continuum of test preparation strategies that require increasing amounts of time, which detracts from instruction, and at the extreme end could be considered cheating.^[xxxii]</p>
<p>School and district leaders support the use of publicly visible data walls and other forms of information sharing that focus solely on improving assessment outcomes rather than on learning.</p>	<p>School and district leaders support the use of publicly visible posters and other forms of information sharing that focus on learning and growth rather than on absolute outcomes of assessment.</p>	<p>When school or district goals prioritize test performance over a comprehensive demonstration of student understanding, this often leads to a narrowed curriculum. This focus on “teaching to the test” restricts students’ access to an enriching educational experience.^[xxxiii]</p>
<p>Assessment data are not available/accessible or are difficult to track within Learning Management Systems (LMS).</p>	<p>Assessment data from multiple sources are accessible and easy to track within Learning Management Systems (LMS).</p>	<p>Educators must be provided with access to assessment data in a format that supports their use of the data. When districts/schools do not prioritize access and interpretation of assessment data, it sends a clear, negative message about the value of that information in supporting teaching and learning.</p>

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The ISTE logo is centered within a large, dark blue circle. The letters 'I', 'S', 'T', and 'E' are white and bold, with a thin white line passing through the 'I' and 'S'. A registered trademark symbol (®) is located to the right of the 'E'. The background of the entire page is a vibrant blue with a pattern of small, light blue dots. Overlaid on this are several white and yellow circular and linear graphic elements, including a large white circle that frames the ISTE logo, a yellow circle to the left, and a white circle to the right, all connected by thin white lines. A thick yellow and dark blue curved band sweeps across the middle of the page.

ISTE is partnering with assessment experts from the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, with funding from the Walton Family Foundation and Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, to explore the concept of assessment culture and refine a set of assessment culture continua. The ultimate goal is to support districts in identifying key aspects of assessment culture (i.e., make them visible) and facilitate change for school-based assessment practices to more positively impact student learning.