

BALANCED ASSESSMENT:

The Key to Accountability and
Improved Student Learning

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Student Assessment Series

BALANCED ASSESSMENT:

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Improved Student Learning**



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INTRODUCTION

Current educational policy and practice is adrift in the belief that increased large-scale student testing is the key to improving student learning as well as the most appropriate means for holding individual schools accountable to the public for student learning. States, districts, and schools are instituting numerous standardized testing programs to comply with federal and state policies. Often these multiple assessment programs are at odds with each other and the student informational needs of classroom teachers.

This paper calls for a balance among the multiple assessment systems currently being instituted and describes the key building blocks for such an assessment system. It describes the appropriate and inappropriate uses of standardized testing within a balanced system. Further, the paper explains how to create a balanced assessment system to meet the needs of multiple stakeholders.

In addition, readers will find an extended discussion of the role of classroom assessment in a balanced assessment system. An essential component of classroom instruction, classroom assessment also provides ongoing and easy to understand information to students, parents, teachers, and schools. The paper describes how classroom assessment should interface with standardized testing and provides a substantial research base on the positive impact of effective classroom assessment. It will assist educators in implementing school programs that are founded upon that research base.

To move classroom assessment into its appropriate role beside standardized testing in a balanced assessment system, policymakers must invest in key areas of pre-service education, licensure requirement changes, and professional development in assessment literacy. The paper calls for investments in high quality large-scale assessment and more funding for classroom assessment. These additional resources, it argues, should be used, in part, to ensure that teachers and administrators have the competencies necessary to use classroom assessment as an essential component of a balanced assessment program.

We trust NEA state and local affiliates will find this paper useful in advocating for balanced assessment systems and enhancing the use of classroom assessment to improve student learning.



BALANCED ASSESSMENT:

The Key to Accountability and Improved Student Learning

For schools to function effectively as centers of learning, different decision makers—teachers, students, parents, school administrators, state legislators, and other policymakers—need access to accurate and understandable information about student achievement. Only then can they make the kinds of instructional decisions that will maximize student learning. These decisions vary greatly in their nature and frequency across decision makers. Some are made once a year, others every few minutes. Some require comparable information summarized across students, others are unique to an individual student.

**...no single assessment
can meet everyone's
information needs.**

Some require comparison of students to each other, others must compare students to preset standards. Because of this diversity, no single assessment can meet everyone's information needs. Some can be informed by once-a-year tests, while others require the continuous flow of evidence that only can be provided by classroom assessment.

Thus, diverse decision makers' information needs can only be met by assessment systems that balance classroom *and* standardized assessments—systems in which the two are integrated. Unfortunately, most assessment systems are out of balance, with standardized tests dominating. That must change because it leaves critically important information needs of crucial decision makers unmet. This paper reviews why assessment systems are currently out of balance, describes the properties and benefits of balanced assessment systems, and maps out action steps to promote excellence – and balance – in assessment.

Balanced assessment systems provide accurate and timely information about student achievement to individual students, teachers, school and district administrators, and local, state, and federal policymakers. In addition, however, they encourage and support learning by helping students and teachers believe that their continued efforts will result in success. In other words, because they balance high quality periodic standardized tests with accurate day to day classroom assessments, balanced assessment systems actually promote, and don't merely check for, student learning.

Current Assessment Systems Are Out of Balance

Historically, assessment systems in the United States have not balanced standardized and classroom assessments. To the contrary, educational policy makers have been, and continue to be, obsessed with the belief that the path to school improvement is paved with more and better standardized tests, from college admissions tests to local, state, national and international assessments. Across the nation, across the various levels of schooling, and over the past five decades, the nation has invested billions of dollars to ensure the accuracy of standardized tests. The 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 2002) requires standardized testing of every student in the United States in mathematics and reading every year in grades three through eight, once again revealing the nation's faith in standardized assessment as a school improvement tool. ESEA is the latest indication of a continued belief that merely checking achievement status and reporting the results to the public applies the pressure that is needed to improve schools; that standardized tests provide educational decision makers with the information they need to make critically important school improvement decisions.

The problem is, these once-a-year standardized tests cannot provide the continuous flow of information about student achievement that teachers and students need to do their day-to-day jobs. Only classroom assessment can provide this kind of information. Assessment systems in this country have simply ignored the critically important day-to-day information needs of teachers and students. And because assessment systems have failed to recognize the importance of classroom assessment, policymakers have failed to invest in the professional preparation needed to help teachers master the principles of sound classroom assessment practice. As a result, these day-to-day assessments cannot be counted on to provide the accurate information needed for ongoing

instructional decisions. To counter this long-standing problem, we must act to assure the quality and effective use of classroom assessment. We must strive for integrated and balanced assessment systems.

A Balanced Assessment System

Balanced assessment systems are built on a strong foundation composed of several key building blocks. If any are disregarded, whether in the context of classroom or standardized assessment, then poor assessment practice will result and students will be placed directly in harm's way.

Because the purpose of assessment is to gather information to inform instructional decisions, and because a variety of different decision makers influence school effectiveness, a balanced assessment system is built from its inception with *diverse information needs* in mind. It does not assume that one assessment can meet everyone's information needs. Rather, it assumes that each assessment is designed to fit a specific context.

All assessments in a balanced system arise from the foundational understanding that *the primary mission of school is to maximize student success* and not merely to rank students based on achievement by the end of high school. To maximize student success, assessment

must be seen as an instructional tool for use while learning is occurring, and as an accountability tool to determine if learning has occurred. Because both purposes are important, they must be in balance.

In a balanced assessment system, the foundation of all assessment is *an agreed upon and a universally embraced set of achievement expectations*. Undefined, poorly defined, or inappropriate achievement targets cannot be understood by teacher or learner, effectively taught or assessed dependably. Achievement targets, or standards must reflect the best current thinking about the mean-

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ing of academic success in each subject area. They must include the various forms of achievement that underpin the curriculum: mastery of content knowledge, the use of that knowledge to reason and solve problems, mastery of performance skills, and the ability to create products that meet standards of quality. Further, each teacher in each classroom absolutely must be a master of the achievement targets that their students are supposed to attain.

A balanced assessment system also *requires the development and use of accurate assessments*. To this end, every educator must understand the principles of sound assessment and must be able to apply those principles as a matter of routine in doing their work. Put another way, accurate assessment is not possible unless and until educators are given the opportunity to become assessment literate. Each assessor at every level, from the classroom to the state boardroom, must understand student achievement expectations and how to transform those expectations into accurate assessment exercises and scoring procedures. They must understand when and how to apply a variety of assessment methods, including selected response, essay, performance assessment, and direct personal communication with learners.

In addition, balanced assessment systems cause students to **want** to learn and teachers to **want** to be the very best they can be by *offering an expectation of success for all who try to learn*. In other words, the motivation to succeed cannot arise from the fear of not succeeding. Rather it can only arise from the confidence of knowing that continued effort will pay off. Therefore, the system focuses the user's attention on changes in student achievement over time, both for individual students and groups of students. This permits students to see and feel in control of their own success. It also relies on information gathering, summary, and communication processes that inform and accommodate the *unique needs of each learner*.

Further, in a balanced system, *everyone communicates assessment results to intended users in a timely and understandable manner*; checking to be sure the message got through and was understood. Message senders and receivers share common visions of the targets to be attained, the evidence needed to verify learning, the meaning of the symbols and language used to communicate assessment results, and the necessity of keeping communication doors open for information to pass. In a balanced system, a variety of modes of communication come into play, including report cards, portfolios, and various conference formats.

And finally, balanced systems need to operate under the *watchful and supportive eyes of communities*. Parents, school board members, taxpayers, and the local community must be given the opportunity to learn about sound assessment, record keeping, and communication practices, so they are able to recognize sound and unsound practices (Chappuis and Chappuis, 2002). This local support is essential to achieving effective assessment practice.

If any of these building blocks of balanced assessment systems are not in place, either with classroom or standardized assessments, assessment resources will be wasted, assessment results will be of inferior quality, or students can be harmed.

Standardized and Classroom Assessment Make Different, But Compatible, Contributions

While effective assessment systems balance high-quality classroom and standardized assessments, they also recognize the different, but compatible, contributions of these two kinds of assessments. Classroom and standardized assessments serve different purposes; provide information for different audiences or users; focus on different, but related, achievement targets; call for

Table 1 A Portrait of Balanced Assessment
Both Classroom and Standardized Assessments must:
Serve a mission of maximum student success
Address diverse information needs
Reflect clear and appropriate achievement standards
Rely on accurate assessments
Build the confidence of students and teachers
Rely on effective communication
Build and serve supportive communities

students and teachers to play different roles and exercise different responsibilities; and rely on different ways to motivate students to do well on the assessments. Excellence in assessment requires the effective accommodation of these differences.

Different Purposes

Standardized assessments *document the achievement status* of individual students or student groups at a particular point in time. They are driven by the concept of accountability. Students are expected to attain certain achievement targets by a specific age or grade. Standardized tests check to see if this has happened and they inform various users about it.

Classroom assessment serves a different purpose. Instead of merely checking students' achievement status, effective classroom assessments actually can *increase that achievement*. They are driven by the concept of improvement. Teachers can use the classroom assessment process and its results to support each student's specific learning, regardless of where the student falls along an achievement continuum.

Using assessment to increase student achievement and then to document that new achievement status are both important, and in a balanced assessment system they complement one another. Students' sense of personal responsibility for attaining an achievement target or standard (accountability) is combined with their confidence that they can, in fact, master the required material (improvement) to underpin their success. Classroom assessment promotes and documents growth over time with an eye toward demonstrating competence periodically on standardized assessments.

Different Intended Users

When standardized tests are administered, they typically are intended to inform various policy-level and programmatic decision makers, as well as teachers, parents and the community, about student achievement. They are assessments *of* learning. Students are not the intended users. Rather, the tests inform others about students.

In the context of classroom assessment, however, one key purpose can be to use assessment results to *inform students about themselves*. That is, classroom assessments can inform students about the continuous improvements in their achievement and permit them to feel in control of that growth. Thus, class-

room assessments become assessments *for* learning. Teachers involve their students in the classroom assessment process for the expressed purpose of increasing their achievement.

Although they are different, both assessments *of* and *for* learning are important (Stiggins, 2002). While they are not interchangeable, they must be compatible.

Different Achievement Targets

Classroom and standardized assessments must be grounded in the same academic achievement standards. However, they treat those standards in fundamentally different ways. State assessments, for example, consist of exercises and rely on scoring schemes that ask students to *demonstrate that they have met state standards*. They lead to conclusions regarding students' mastery of those standards.

Classroom assessments also relate to state standards, but the teacher's classroom assessment job is not to create mini-versions of the state assessment, nor is it to practice old state assessments. Rather, the teacher's classroom assessment job is to *identify, teach, and assess classroom-level achievement targets that underpin student success*—that enable students to grow to a place where they can demonstrate that they

have met state standards. To identify classroom achievement targets that underpin state standards, teachers should ask the following four questions:

1. What do my students need to *know and understand* in order to be ready to demonstrate that they have met this standard when the time comes to do so? In other words, what are the knowledge foundations of my students' success here?
2. What *patterns of reasoning*, if any, must my students be in control of in order to be successful when the time comes to demonstrate mastery of this competence?

...the teacher's classroom assessment job is to identify, teach, and assess classroom-level achievement targets that underpin student success...

3. What *performance skills*, if any, must students have mastered prior to the time when they must demonstrate that they have met this standard?
4. What *product development capabilities*, if any, must my students be ready to bring into play when they are assessed on mastery of this standard?

These classroom-level achievement targets should be the focus of classroom instruction and assessment. They are the building blocks, or scaffolding that lead to student competence on standardized assessments. It is seldom the case that students instantaneously master a high level standard. Rather they build toward mastery over time. Day to day classroom assessment must take them along the journey to demonstrating their competence on standardized assessments.

Once again, standards are important to both assessment *of* learning and assessment *for* learning. They must be aligned.

Different Results

Standardized tests provide *comparable information* about students' performance. All students respond to the same exercises under the same conditions. Test scores have the same meaning across all students and groups of students and therefore can be aggregated. This is the strength of standardized tests.

Classroom assessments, on the other hand, often rely on exercises, scoring procedures and conditions of administration that are *unique to an individual student or a particular group of students*. Yet, even though the results may not be comparable, high-quality classroom assessments can provide accurate information about students' performance that has clear and important meaning to students and teachers, thus suggesting action on the part of both that will result in greater achievement.

Different Roles and Responsibilities

In the context of standardized testing, the teacher's initial role is to prepare students for the assessments, encouraging them to take the test seriously. In addition, however, the teacher's job is to assure compliance with prescribed test administration procedures to maximize accuracy. Finally, teachers must understand and be prepared to interpret and use the test results to benefit students. This includes explaining test results to parents. The stu-

dents' role in the standardized test context is to apply themselves, complete the test, and strive for the highest possible score.

In the classroom assessment context, students' and teachers' roles are fundamentally different. Teachers transform standards into the classroom-level achievement targets that unfold over time and enable students ultimately to arrive at a level of proficiency that allows them to meet the standards. Teachers also keep students in touch with and feeling in control of their own growth over time through the effective use of student-involved assessment (Stiggins, 2001).

They accomplish this by transforming achievement targets into student-friendly terms and then sharing those visions of success with their students. Next they transform those targets into accurate classroom assessments, sometimes involving their students in the development of practice versions of those assessments. This has the effect of revealing to students what success looks like, as well as where they are now in relation to that vision. The path to success becomes clear. Then teachers involve their students in repeated self assessments over time with achievement standards held constant, so students can watch themselves grow. And finally they can involve students in the process of telling the story of their journey to success in student-led parent/teacher conferences, for example.

In this context, then, students must strive to understand classroom-level achievement targets—what success looks like. In addition, they must learn to use interim classroom assessment results to understand how to improve their performance over time—to perform at a higher level next time. In this sense, they learn to take charge of their own growth.

Teachers' and students' roles and responsibilities differ fundamentally across assessment contexts, but they must be complementary.

Different Motivators

Historically, results from standardized tests (i.e., assessments *of* learning) have served as the basis for rewarding and punishing individual students, schools, and districts. The promise of rewards certainly can motivate students and drive them to learn more. Punishment, or the threat of punishment for failure, on the other hand, is a poor motivator. Increased pressure to learn in the face of a history of chronic failure causes some students to retreat from

the risk of trying to learn because they come to believe that they are not capable of learning. Effort becomes pointless for them. Ongoing public failure simply hurts too much.

An effective classroom assessment environment changes the emotional environment surrounding assessment by focusing on students' confidence and persistence. Classroom assessment (i.e., assessment *for* learning) provides students with information about their progress over time toward the final target (i.e. meeting state standards), shows them where they are now in relation to that target, and helps them monitor their own learning and performance as they build the skills, knowledge, and understanding needed to attain state standards. Students understand that "I can do this if I keep trying."

Table 2
Differences in Classroom and Standardized Assessments

<i>Uniquely Standardized Assessment:</i>	<i>Uniquely Classroom Assessment:</i>
Strives to <i>document</i> achievement	Strives to <i>increase</i> achievement
Informs <i>others</i> about students	Informs students about <i>themselves</i>
Provides assessment <i>of</i> learning	Provides assessment <i>for</i> learning
Reflects <i>standards</i> themselves	Reflects <i>targets</i> that underpin standards
Produces <i>comparable</i> results	Can produce results that are <i>unique</i> to individual students
Teacher's role is to <i>gauge</i> success	Teacher's role is to <i>promote</i> success
Student's role is to strive for a <i>high score</i>	Student's role is to strive for <i>improvement</i>
Motivates with promise of <i>rewards and punishments</i>	Motivates with the promise of <i>success</i>

Research Evidence Supports the Importance of Classroom Assessment

In 1984, Bloom provided a summary of numerous studies on the impact of mastery learning models comparing standard whole-class instruction (the control condition) with two experimental interventions, a mastery-learning environment and one-on-one tutoring of individual students. One hallmark of both experimental conditions was extensive use of classroom assessment in support of learning as a key part of the instructional process. The analyses revealed differences ranging from one to two standard deviations increase in student achievement favoring the experimental versus control conditions (Bloom, 1984).

“improved formative assessment helps low achievers more than other students and so reduces the range of achievement while raising achievement overall”.

In their research review of over 250 studies, Black and Wiliam examined the research literature on the impact of sound classroom assessment practice on student achievement worldwide (Black and Wiliam, 1998). They asked if there is evidence that improving the quality and effectiveness of use of formative (classroom) assessments raises student achievement as reflected in summative (standardized) assessments. If so, they asked, what kinds of improvements in classroom assessment practice are likely to yield the greatest gains in achievement?

Black and Wiliam report effect sizes like those reported by Bloom: a half to a full standard deviation gain in student achievement when classroom assessment is managed effectively. Further, they report that “improved formative assessment helps low achievers more than other students and so reduces the range of achievement while raising achievement overall” (p. 141). This result has direct implications for districts seeking to reduce achievement gaps between low SES students and other students. Very few school improvement innovations can claim effects of this nature or this size.

To fully appreciate the magnitude of the effect sizes cited above, a gain of one standard deviation applied to the middle of the test score distribution on

commonly used standardized achievement tests can yield average gains of over 30 percentile points, up to four grade equivalents, or 100 SAT (College Board) score points, for example. If the United States had realized a gain of this magnitude on the Third International Mathematics and Science Study math assessment results, we would have raised our place in the rank order of 42 participating nations from the middle of the pack to the top five.

Achievement gains are maximized in contexts where educators:

- increase the accuracy of classroom assessments,
- provide students with frequent informative feedback (versus infrequent or merely judgmental feedback), and
- involve students deeply in the classroom assessment, record keeping, and communication processes.

Creating Balanced Assessment Systems

Everyone wins with a balanced, effective assessment system, where assessment promotes learning through classroom assessment and documents learning through standardized assessment. Achievement goes up, student and teacher confidence increases, and schools function far more effectively. But creating balanced assessment systems calls for considerable investment in teachers and their classroom assessment practices, as well as ongoing investment in standardized testing.

Investing in High Quality Large-Scale Assessment

Federal, state or local agencies that conduct large-scale standardized testing programs must assure that their assessments are of the highest possible quality. They can accomplish this by meeting requirements spelled out by the Commission on Instructionally Supportive Assessment (2001). The nine requirements maximize the link between assessment results and effective instruction.

The Commission calls for states to set priorities among standards, and focus their standardized tests on a small number of standards that represent the most important or enduring knowledge and skills that students need to learn. The Commission also calls on states to provide educators and test developers with brief, user-friendly descriptions of the knowledge and skills

students must demonstrate to meet each standard. In this way, teachers will know what they are being asked to teach, and they will have confidence that the state test is indeed linked to key standards.

As a capstone, the Commission requires states to provide teachers, other educators, parents, and students with information on how well each student is meeting each and every standard. Results on statewide-standardized tests should be reported standard-by-standard. How else, it asks, can anyone get a sense of whether students are attaining the standards?

But if states revamped their testing programs by implementing these requirements, there is a real danger that the curriculum might be narrowed to focus exclusively on the standards assessed by the standardized tests. Therefore, the Commission calls for states to monitor the breadth and depth of the curriculum in order to maintain appropriate breadth.

In addition, it urges states to create optional classroom tests aligned with remaining standards. Teachers could choose to use these optional assessments — or not. And the Commission calls upon states to provide rigorous professional development for teachers in interpreting state achievement tests, in using these assessments, and as important, in developing their own assessments to determine how well students are attaining the standards that are not assessed on statewide achievement tests.

In summary, the Commission has advanced a vision of a balanced assessment system in which classroom assessments and standardized tests play important, and related, roles.

Investing in Classroom Assessment Literacy

Every year, the United States invests huge sums in developing, administering, interpreting and disseminating results of district, state, national, and international standardized assessments. In the service of balanced assessment, it should become a national, state and local priority to match every dol-

Federal, state or local agencies that conduct large-scale standardized testing programs must assure that their assessments are of the highest possible quality.

lar invested in standardized assessment with another dollar devoted to assuring the quality and effective use of day-to-day classroom assessments. Over the decades, teachers have not been given the tools needed to meet their classroom assessment, evaluation, or grading responsibilities. Resources are desperately needed to rectify this imbalance.

Comprehensive long-term national, state and local professional development programs that build teachers' classroom assessment literacy would help rectify the imbalance, especially if it is coupled with a second comprehensive effort: a similar professional development program in effective large-scale and classroom assessment practice for state, district and building administrators. This effort would teach administrators how to provide leadership in

developing and implementing balanced assessment systems.

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The assessment competencies to be developed by teachers are clear. To begin with, each teacher absolutely must be a master of the knowledge, reasoning,

performance skill and product development targets that their students are expected to master. Further, they must understand how to use a variety of assessment methods to transform those targets into accurate assessment exercises and scoring procedures that accurately measure student learning. They must understand, for example, how to assemble high-quality exercises into an array that adequately samples student achievement and how to avoid the common sources of bias that can distort assessment results. To be effective, teachers must be able to manage and effectively communicate information about student achievement. Finally, and most importantly, they must understand when and how to involve students in the classroom assessment, record keeping and communication processes in ways that maximize confidence, motivation and learning.

Administrators need to know what to look for in the classroom that makes assessment part of effective instruction: clear targets, standards of assessment quality, principles of assessment *for* learning, student involvement, etc. They

also need to know what to do if assessment is not a part of learning so they can support teachers in their professional growth. In addition, administrators must be able to develop and implement policies and practices that contribute to sound assessment practice and help achieve a balanced assessment system in districts and schools. These would include communication policies and practices related to grading and reporting student progress, and communicating about the variety of school assessments and their relationship to improving curriculum and instruction. Administrators also must understand how to improve student learning through the productive and appropriate use of the multiple levels of student achievement information, from both assessments *of* and assessments *for* learning.

Since the vast majority of practicing teachers and administrators have not been given the opportunity to develop these competencies, action must be taken immediately to fill these profoundly important gaps in professional competence.

Investing in Pre-service Preparation and Changing Licensure Requirements

While rectifying the effects of decades of neglect in practitioners' assessment training is critically important, it is equally important to plan for a future that eliminates this problem. This requires a change in teacher and administrator licensing standards in every state, and in national certification such as the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, should include a requirement related to assessment literacy. Only a handful of states require competence in assessment for teachers as a licensure requirement and almost none require it of administrators. This must change to achieve excellence in assessment. In addition teacher and administrator preparation programs must assure that their graduates are assessment literate. Pre-service programs must help graduates learn to gather dependable information about student achievement and to use the assessment process and its results to benefit students, not merely to grade and rank them. Program accreditation standards also must be revised, as needed, to reflect this expectation.

Investing in a Future of Balance

Federal education officials, states policy makers, and local school leaders must allocate resources in equitable proportions to assure the accuracy and effective use of both classroom and standardized assessments. This will assure

families that their children benefit from assessment *for* and *of* learning. It will maximize students' confidence in themselves as learners, increase teachers' sense of efficacy in the classroom, and raise achievement levels for all students.

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