Supporting Balanced Assessment within the TK-12 Learning Ecosystem

Executive Summary

The development and implementation of a balanced and comprehensive assessment system is essential to support relevant, meaningful, and rigorous teaching and learning. When successfully implemented, a balanced assessment system can inform minute-by-minute decisions while learning is taking place, measure student achievement or progress over time, and provide information about the effectiveness of educational programs and measure multi-year progress.

With the development of a comprehensive and balanced assessment system, the focus shifts from compliance to a commitment for mutual capacity-building for the purpose of:
- producing measurable gains in student learning and achievement,
- fostering systemic collaboration to improve student outcomes,
- building cultures of co-learning and reflective inquiry that lead to sustainable change, and
- promoting a climate of candor, evidence-based decision making, and urgency to take action.

What is a balanced assessment system?

Assessment is the process of gathering evidence of student learning to inform instructional decisions. "A balanced assessment system consists of tools to assess and inform learning. The assessment tools inform policy, programs and individual teachers and learners in a coherent and coordinated manner" (Gong, 2010). A balanced assessment system consists of three distinct and necessary components: summative assessment, interim assessment, and formative assessment. Each of these components play a particular role in providing coherent and relevant information throughout the educational system including the classroom level, the grade/department level, and the school, district and state level. Ultimately, a balanced assessment system "serves a variety of purposes, uses a variety of measures, and meets the information and decision-making needs of all assessment users at the classroom, building, and district levels" (Chappuis, Commodore and Stiggins, 2016). Understanding the key distinctions of formative, interim, and summative assessment and the different uses of the evidence and information they respectively provide is crucial in developing a comprehensive assessment system.

A fundamental understanding of the role and purpose of assessment, referred to as assessment literacy, is critical for the successful development and implementation of a balanced comprehensive assessment system. "Those who are assessment literate understand how to gather dependable evidence and how to use it productively to

support or certify achievement" (National Task Force on Assessment Education for Teachers, 2016). Assessment literate individuals also understand the distinction between "testing" and "assessment." Tests are one method of gathering evidence of learning. Assessment is more comprehensive and is comprised of a variety of evidence gathering methods including, but not limited to, observations, interviews, performance tasks, portfolios, performances, and surveys.

How can a balanced assessment system help student achievement and school capacity?

"Assessment can be a powerful support for improving student achievement and school capacity by providing credible, focused information on overall patterns of performance, strengths and weaknesses related to student learning and instructional programs, and feedback on how to improve" (Gong, 2010). Assessment information is necessary for students, teachers, administrators, and parents to determine what is working, where support needs to be provided, as well as what might need to be changed. Evidence of learning and achievement can be gathered through formal and informal assessment processes. Formal assessments may include tests and exams, while informal measures may include observation, conversation, and examining evidence of student learning during classroom instruction. Understanding that there are different types of assessments for different purposes and audiences, and using the information and evidence gathered in an appropriate way, must be a key consideration in the development of a balanced assessment system.

What are the three levels of assessment within a balanced system?

Assessment can be thought of as a process of reasoning from evidence in order to determine, *What is working*? *For whom*? *Under what circumstances*? and *Where to next*? A balanced assessment system contains formative, interim, and summative assessments that allow these questions to be answered in a coherent and systematic way. These three components serve different purposes and provide information at three distinct levels. Formative, interim, and summative assessment operate in different time frames or cycles: short, medium, and long, and "each cycle provides information at varying levels of detail and inferences drawn from the assessment results are used to address specific questions about student learning and inform a range of decisions and actions." (CA Science Framework, 2016). The table below shows the different assessment types and their relationship to the method, purpose, and use by participants.

Assessment: A Process of Reasoning from Evidence			
Dimension	**Assessment for Learning**	**Assessment of Learning**	
Method	Formative Assessment process	Classroom Summative/Interim/ Benchmark Assessment	Large-scale Summative Assessment
Purpose	Assist immediate learning	Measure student achievement and progress	Evaluate educational programs
Focus	Teaching and learning	Measurement	Accountability
Locus	Individual student and Classroom learning	Classroom/Grade Level/ Department/ School	School/District/State
Proximity to Learning	Integrated	Middle-distance	Distant
Timing	*During* instruction	After teaching-learning cycle	End of year/Course
Participants	Teacher and Student (T-S / S-S / Self)	Student	Student

Source: *Linquanti, R. (2014)*

What is formative assessment?

Formative assessment, often referred to as assessment *for* learning, "is a process teachers and students use during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching moves and learning tactics. It is not a specific test, nor an event, nor a bank of test items" (Linquanti, R. 2014). Put another way, "formative assessment is a planned process in which teachers and students use assessment based evidence to adjust what they're currently doing" (Popham, 2008). Both of these definitions emphasizes the importance of formative assessment as "process" and focus on the evidence of learning that is gathered by both the teacher and student during classroom instruction.

The proximity of formative assessment to real-time learning is what makes it such a powerful tool in moving student learning forward. Because formative assessment is "tied

to immediate learning goals and may involve both formal tasks as well as activities conducted as part of a lesson… instructional activities and assessment activities may be intertwined or even indistinguishable" (CDE Science Framework, 2016). Ongoing use of formative assessment can lead to statistically significant gains in student learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998).

According to experts in the assessment field including Rick Stiggins, Margaret Heritage, Robert Linquanti, Susan Brookhart, and others, formative assessment has key practices associated with it which differentiates it from other assessment types. While the experts may name them differently, the key practices include:

1. Clarifying the intended learning (sharing clear lesson/learning goals and success criteria)
2. Eliciting evidence of learning (gathering evidence of what students make, say, do, or write during lessons)
3. Interpreting evidence (teachers and students determining progress relative to goals)
4. Acting on evidence (teachers and students take next steps, including feedback loop)

Formative assessment actively engages the student in the assessment process and "operates as a feedback loop in which both teachers and students can play active, distinctive, yet complementary roles in enabling learning by consistently working to build and consolidate student understanding and skills during the course of a lesson" (Heritage, 2011). According to Chappuis, Commodore, and Stiggins (2017), "with student involvement in the assessment process comes proven yet untapped potential for increased student learning. It is with formative assessment strategies in the classroom...where students are users, decision makers, and players in the entire process."

Why is formative assessment important?

In addition to supporting student learning, formative assessment plays a critical role in developing student agency. By providing students with feedback about their learning, and engaging them in self- and peer-assessment, students learn how to set learning goals, evaluate and monitor their progress, and learn to take steps to move their own learning forward as they develop greater levels of autonomy and mastery. When "students are involved in the assessment process, they are more likely to develop a learning orientation than if they are solely passive recipients of test scores. They are more likely to develop skills in setting goals, managing the pursuit of those goals, and

self-monitoring" (California ELA/ELD Framework, 2014). As such, formative assessment is the cornerstone in the development of personalized learning.

Formative assessment also supports the development of the transferable skills students need for life and work in the 21st century as articulated in the college- and career-ready standards. According to Hilton and Pellegrino (2012), assessment systems that incorporate formative assessment practices support students in developing knowledge within three domains of competence; the cognitive domain, the intrapersonal domain and interpersonal domain. Robert Linquanti (2014) asserts that these transferable skills are particularly important for English learner students and students of poverty as the formative assessment process provides purposeful opportunities to engage in academic dialogue, routinely articulate thinking, and collaboratively problem-solve with peers and teachers.

What is interim assessment?

Interim assessment, also referred to as benchmark assessment, is a specific kind of assessment that is designed to occur at the end of a teaching-learning cycle and is an assessment *of* learning. Interim assessments are typically testing events that measure students attainment of knowledge and skills in between units of instruction "occupying a middle position strategically located and administered outside daily classroom use but inside the school and/or district curriculum" (Herman, Osmundson, and Dietel, 2010). These medium-cycle assessments help to identify how students are progressing, as well as which components of an instructional program are working effectively and those that need improvement. These assessments can be common across classrooms, districts, and counties as instructional programs are adopted and implemented.

Why is interim assessment important?

Interim assessment is "used to measure the incremental learning of students throughout a given period of time. These tests identify specific performance standards students have or have not achieved and often reveal possible reasons why students have not yet progressed in certain areas" (California Mathematics Framework, 2015). Interim assessment is critical in answering the question, what standards are students mastering or not mastering, so that teacher teams, teacher leaders, principals, and curriculum personnel make appropriate and timely decisions around supporting student and programmatic needs. To some degree, frequent interim assessment can serve a formative purpose when the evidence is used to inform and adjust instruction.

What is summative assessment?

Summative assessment, also referred to as long-cycle assessment, refers to the assessment of learning at a particular point in time and typically has higher stakes for

the student and/or teacher. Summative assessment is meant to summarize a learner's development and frequently takes the form of end of unit tests, essays, culminating projects, semester finals, and state-level annual tests. Similar to interim assessments, they occur at specific points in the academic year and serve an important role within the balanced system.

"In contrast to formative assessment, summative assessment represents the state of a student's skills and knowledge at a particular point in time and is meant to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction and a student's learning progress. Such assessments are not necessarily used to inform instruction, but they can be used to measure the effectiveness of an instructional program" (California Mathematics Framework, 2015).

Why is summative assessment important?

Summative assessment is important for developing snapshots of student progress over time and is focused on products of learning. Typically summative assessments are higher stakes and utilized for accountability purposes.

At the classroom level, summative assessment is generally used as part of the grading process. At the school and district level, common summative assessment is used to inform decisions about student placement, certification, curriculum, and school- and district-wide implementation of programs. At the state level, annual standardized assessments are administered to establish if enough students are meeting required standards to inform superintendents, school boards, legislators, and the public. "It is a matter of law that schools will administer annual assessments to all students in certain grade levels, revealing the proportion of students mastering pre-established standards so as to evaluate the overall institutional impact" (Stiggins, 2008).

What is a culture of assessment?

A balanced assessment system cannot exist in a vacuum; it must exist within a culture of assessment. A culture of assessment can be defined as environment in which decisions are based on data and evidence, research, and analysis and where services are planned and delivered in ways that maximize positive outcomes and impacts for students and stakeholders. While many districts and schools have a variety of assessments and tools for measuring student learning, they do not have the culture that is "essential to build clarity of the learning goals, build precision in the pedagogical practices, and foster collective capacity building to mobilize a consistent shift in practices" (Fullan and Quinn, 2016).

Evidence that a culture of assessment exists is demonstrated when teachers and administrators know what assessment results they produce and how these results relate

to desired institutional and learning outcomes for students. Ultimately, these results are used to support continuous improvement in school and district effectiveness and student learning, and are transparent to students, teachers, administrators, parents, and stakeholders.

Developing a culture of assessment requires a coherent plan, infrastructure, resources, and time. Many districts and schools have an assessment program in theory, not in practice. In other words, some requisite elements of a balanced assessment system and culture of assessment are in place, but significant work remains to be done to fully develop, articulate, and implement in order to achieve the ideal state. "There are many ways to design an effective assessment system, but all should begin with careful consideration of the way that the assessment data are to be used, the type of information that is needed to support those uses and how the various components of the system work together" (Pellegrino, et. al., 2014).

Some key considerations in developing a balanced assessment system and culture of assessment would include:

- Honoring work that has taken place and build on past and current success
- Conducting an assessment inventory and developing an assessment plan
- Added time for teachers to develop assessment literacy, through activities like creating and evaluating common assessments, critically examining available performance tasks, filming classroom assessment practices, or implementing communities of practice to deepen understanding through content
- Creating an environment that embraces assessment as part of the districts' and schools' daily work
- Including student voice and choice in the assessment process
- Proactively and intentionally collecting, analyzing, and reporting assessment data for student learning
- Providing faculty with ongoing professional learning to develop deep understanding and implementation of all components of a balanced assessment system:
  - Formative assessment processes embedded into daily classroom practice
  - Interim assessment
  - Summative assessment
- Developing and fostering communities of practice focused on continuous improvement of teaching and learning
- Engaging all stakeholders in feedback opportunities around current assessment systems and practices

A culture of assessment exists in an organization/institution where faculty and administrators care to know what assessment results they produce and how these results relate to desired institutional outcomes and learning outcomes for students, their parents, and other stakeholders. Equally important is use of the results for continuous improvement in the effectiveness of the organization and of teaching and learning.

No administration of an assessment should occur without the intended use of data clearly shared with teachers, students, and the community. Parents, teachers, school and district administrators, policy makers, the public, and students need clear, accessible, and timely information. In a systems approach, many different kinds of information need to be available, but not all audience need the same information. Rick Stiggins advocates in *Assessment Literacy for Students: A Student's Bill of Assessment Rights*, "Students are entitled to know the purpose for each assessment in which they participate; that is, they have a right to know specifically how the results will be used and by whom. Assessments and their results can support learning or certify it. Students are entitled to know which application applies to each assessment in which they participate. If the purpose is to help them learn more, then they should have the opportunity to understand how the assessment will support them; that is, what decisions they or their teacher will make based on the results that will promote their growth" (2014).

Conclusion

A comprehensive balanced assessment system consists of cycles of assessments that are designed and used for different purposes addressing the full range of knowledge and skills expected by standards while providing district, school and teachers with data to meet their decision-making needs. Formative assessment, embedded in daily classroom instruction, serves as assessment for learning and actively engages students and teachers in clarifying the intended learning, eliciting and interpreting evidence of learning, and acting on the evidence to impact learning as it is happening in real-time. Formative assessment assists students "in guiding their own learning by evaluating and revising their own thinking or work; and fosters students' sense of autonomy and responsibility for their own learning" (Andrade and Cizek, 2010). Interim and summative assessment provide information on student's current levels of achievement after a period of learning and serve as assessment of learning. These assessments can be administered at the classroom level, districtwide, or statewide. "As part of a balanced and comprehensive assessment system, assessment *for* learning and assessment *of* learning are both important" (California History Social Science Framework, 2016).

In order to build a balanced and comprehensive assessment system, a foundation of assessment literacy must be developed among students, educators, and stakeholders.

Understanding the different assessment types, their purposes, and appropriate uses of the information and evidence yielded from them is essential in developing a culture of assessment that maximizes learning outcomes, develops student agency, allows for differentiation and personalization, and drives systemic continuous improvement.

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