



Do we need an assessment overhaul?

Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins suggest a different approach to measuring students' progress

THE EMERGENCE OF THE NEW COMMON CORE STANDARDS presents an opportunity to re-examine the current system of educational assessments in the U.S. For the past ten years, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) federal statute has required annual state testing as a means of gauging student achievement. Publishing these

test scores establishes accountability, comparing schools and districts, and resulting in consequences for schools that fail to achieve “annual yearly progress” quotas. Responsible educators understand the need for accountability and the NCLB testing program has revealed achievement deficiencies that demand to be addressed.

Nonetheless, the present assessment system is flawed, and ironically may impede the very efforts needed to attain important educational goals.

The adage, “what gets measured signals what is important,” rings true in education. Students regularly ask their teachers, “will this be on the test?” If the answer is “no,” they are less likely to pay attention. Large-scale assessments naturally hold even greater sway. Teachers and administrators pay close attention to state and provincial assessments since their results can have high stakes consequences, not only for students but for schools. If something is not assessed, it can receive less emphasis in the classroom. The result is often a *de facto* narrowing of the curriculum, and misguided “test prep” interventions.

Currently, NCLB employs a “snapshot” approach to assessment through annual state testing in targeted subject areas. Given the large-scale nature of these tests, the majority of them understandably employ a selected-response format, allowing for fast, inexpensive, machine scoring. This type of assessment is simply incapable of measuring students’ responses to open-ended problems and issues, discussion and debate, extended writing for real audiences, or showing substantive research and experimental inquiry. Moreover, many subject areas for which standards exist are not tested at all in many states, and nor do these accountability measures typically test the so-called 21st Century skills of creative thinking, teamwork, multi-media communication, and use of information technologies. It can be argued that current standardized assessments fail to assess many of the most valued goals of schooling.

An alternative approach

We recommend an alternative approach to assessment that can minimize unhealthy curriculum narrowing, provide more robust evidence of academic knowledge and 21st century outcomes, and support meaningful learning through authentic and engaging teaching. Our framework offers a viable approach for achieving three inter-related goals:

- Assessing the most important educational goals in appropriate ways;
- Providing the specific and timely feedback needed to improve learning; and
- Supporting curriculum planning, local assessment, and teaching for meaningful learning.

To achieve these goals, we propose a “multiple measures” approach, with three components for assessing core requirements and other important educational outcomes.

ASSESSMENT

Multiple measures

These are:

- Content-specific tests;
- A series of content-specific and interdisciplinary performance tasks; and
- A local assessment component.

Content-specific tests

Content-specific tests, consisting of multiple choice and brief constructed response (BCR) items designed to test core requirements, do have a value. These types of test have been proven to be effective and efficient at sampling a broad array of basic knowledge and skills drawn from the curriculum. These tests should be computer-based in order to take advantage of enhanced item types made possible through technology-enabled assessments, and to provide nearly immediate feedback in the form of detailed item analyses (not just scores).

We further propose that a Matrix sampling approach be considered as a cost-saving means of obtaining accountability information at the school and district levels without subjecting every student to testing every year on every aspect of the Core Standards. However, states or school districts could opt for census testing if individual student scores are desired. Of course, this type of testing is limited, and therefore needs to be accompanied by other types of test.

Content-specific and interdisciplinary performance tasks

Performance tasks call for students to apply their learning to new situations in context. Accordingly, they are better suited to assess more complex concepts and

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21st Century skills, such as mathematical reasoning, scientific investigation, issues analysis, creative problem solving, oral communications, and technology applications. Performance assessments should be set in real-world contexts, and include both content specific and interdisciplinary performances. Importantly, they should be implemented by teachers *as part of the curriculum* at designated time periods during the school year. Other nations (e.g., the UK) already include assessments scored by teachers as a major element of their national assessments.

This type of assessment would ideally be translated into a national database of performance tasks and companion scoring rubrics, accessible to all teachers so that ideas and resources can be shared. This

What we know

- Current standardized assessments do not adequately assess many of the most valued goals of schooling.
- A better “multiple measures” approach would include content-specific tests; a series of content-specific and interdisciplinary performance tasks; and a local assessment component.
- This would help schools to test what they teach, rather than teaching to the test.

would also be a base from which national or regional assessments could be developed.

It is important to note that scoring would not be contracted to commercial test companies, although companies may be enlisted to help with training, moderation, and reporting. Indeed, a central feature of this proposal relates to the high-impact professional development that accrues when teachers work in teams to score students’ work. Accordingly, the costs of scoring the performance tasks need to be conceived and budgeted as a joint expenditure for assessment *and* professional development.

Local assessments

Standardized national assessment systems are incapable of assessing every student on every educational goal. Therefore, the third component of our system legitimizes the role of local assessment, trusting teachers with the responsibility of scoring work in *all* subject areas. The results, framed in terms of a system of standards, would be made public.

The local component of the assessment system allows for a wide variety of possibilities, including common course exams, student projects and exhibitions, and interdisciplinary tasks involving collaboration and technology applications. More specifically, it:

- Can appropriately assess important achievement targets (e.g., oral reading and speaking, applications of technology, teamwork) that may otherwise “fall through the cracks;”
- Is based on local curricula so that teachers, students, and parents will be more likely to “own” the measures and the results;
- Offers greater flexibility and potential for differentiation (e.g., giving students some choice of topics or products) than

standardized assessments;

- Honors the tradition of local control of education by allowing local decision making, rather than having all high-stakes assessments imposed from the outside; and
- Targets student accountability; i.e., the results become part of local grading and reporting

A cornerstone of this third component is a *Student Standards Folder* – a systematic collection of assessment evidence related to Core Standards and other important educational goals. This would include the results from the performance tasks, content specific tests, and local assessments, as well as rubrics in each subject area to enable more systematic tracking of student achievement (i.e., progress toward meeting standards). The folder would be audited on an annual basis by regional teams of educators and “citizen experts,” with two content areas sampled each year for a state audit. The system would enable educators, parents, and students to track progress over time.

Conclusion

Sadly, the use of classroom time in many schools (at least in the tested grades and subjects) would lead one to conclude that the mission of schools is to improve test taking savvy and raise test scores, rather than to strive for meaningful learning. Of course, it makes sense to familiarize students with test format, but excessive test preparation is *not* the best long-term strategy for developing a well-rounded, educated person *or* improving scores on yearly accountability tests. We contend that our three-part system provides a more comprehensive system for assessment, while avoiding some of the problems of current accountability testing.

About the author

Jay McTighe is an Educational Consultant. With an extensive background in professional development, he is a regular speaker at national and international conferences and workshops. He has co-authored eleven books, including the best-selling *Understanding by Design* series with Grant Wiggins, and written more than thirty articles and book chapters. Jay earned his Masters degree from The University of Maryland and has completed post-graduate studies at Johns Hopkins University.

Further reading

Wiggins G and McTighe J, (2007) *Schooling By Design: Mission, Action, Achievement*. Alexandria: ASCD