

**Assessment FOR Learning, the Achievement Gap,  
and Truly Effective Schools\***

**Rick Stiggins  
ETS Assessment Training Institute  
Portland, OR**

\* A presentation at the Educational Testing Service and College Board conference, Educational Testing in America: State Assessments, Achievement Gaps, National Policy and Innovations. Washington, DC, September 8, 2008.

We have come to a tipping point in American education when we must change our assessment beliefs and act accordingly, or we must abandon hope that all students will meet standards or that the chronic achievement gap will close. The troubling fact is that, if all students don't meet standards—that is, if the gap doesn't close between those who meet and don't meet those standards—our society will be unable to continue to evolve productively in either a social or an economic sense. Yet, paradoxically, assessment as conceived, conducted, and calcified over the past has done as much to perpetuate the gap as it has to narrow it. This must change now and it can. As it turns out (again paradoxically), assessment may be the most powerful tool available to us for ensuring universal student mastery of essential standards.

But to tap this heretofore untapped potential, seven specific assessment actions must be taken. We must:

1. Balance our assessments to meet the information needs of all instructional decision makers
2. Continue to refine our academic achievement standards
3. Assure the quality of classroom assessments
4. Turn the learners into assessors during their learning
5. Rethink our feedback strategies
6. Build on learner success as the universal motivator
7. Assure assessment literacy throughout our assessment systems

In the presentation that follows, I will explicate each action in the following specific terms:

- Enduring belief(s) that have guided assessment in the past that must be abandoned
- New practice(s) to be implemented
- Rationale for their adoption
- Implications for student success and school effectiveness
- The specific locus of control for needed action

## **1. Balance Assessment**

The belief to abandon is that the path to effective schools is paved with standardized achievement tests. While such testing serves valuable accountability purposes, literally decades of obsessive belief in and reliance on such assessments has revealed that they cannot do the job. Some might counter, “no one expected them to do the job alone.” But our actions speak for themselves: sixty years of district, state, national, international and every-pupil testing at a cost of billions over the decades suggests otherwise.

The time has come to acknowledge the extreme limitations of these tests and to balance our investment in assessment with a commitment to other key levels of their use. To see how, consider our definition of assessment: it is the process of gathering information to inform instructional decision making. If this is the case, then to create a quality assessment in any particular context, one cannot proceed productively with

assessment development without answers to three driving questions: What decisions? Who's making them? And, what information will be helpful to them? The assessment must fit the context by providing that specific information in a timely and understandable manner (Stiggins, 2008).

The fact is that the answers to these questions vary profoundly across contexts, from the classroom to the school to the district. A balanced assessment system provides for the information needs of assessment users at all of these levels.

At the classroom level, students and teachers ask, what comes next in the learning? They need continuous information (not once a year or every few weeks) about where each student is now on the scaffolding leading up to each relevant standard in order to answer. Periodic information on who is and is not meeting standards aggregated over students will not suffice for the demands of classroom instruction.

At the program level of instruction, the question does become, which standards are our students mastering and which are they struggling to master. Here, teacher teams, principals, and curriculum personnel need periodic—but frequent—evidence highlighting the standards instructional programs are not delivering. With this information, the faculty can focus their instructional improvement efforts.

At the institutional level, as a matter of law, school leaders must ask, are enough students meeting standards? Communities are entitled to evidence that educators are doing the job they have been hired to do. This, then, is the purview of our annual accountability-oriented state and local accountability tests.

Each level makes its own unique contribution by answering its key question: Classroom: How goes the journey to competence for each student? Program: Which of our instructional programs needs improvement? Institutional: Are enough students succeeding? If any level fails to deliver, the others cannot pick up the slack.

Yet, we have invested literally all of our resources in once-a-year testing for decades. Recently, periodic, benchmark, or assessments have begun to attract some attention. But the other 99.9% of the assessments that happen in a student's learning life—those conducted day to day in the classroom by their teacher—continue to be all but completely ignored as a school improvement tool.

How do we close the achievement gap—the gap between those who have and have not yet met standards—without productive classroom assessment informing student and teacher decisions day to day? Obviously, we cannot. We must balance our assessment systems. This is work that must be done at the school district level with encouragement and support coming from state and federal education agencies. When this is done well, profound achievement gains result with the largest gains accruing for low achievers. Research evidence is detailed below.

## **2. Refine Achievement Standards**

The belief to abandon is that state or local standards represent a sufficient definition of student learning success to support the development of effective schools. Once again, the evidence is to the contrary. We have been functioning for two decades with standards in place and have experienced very small improvements in some places.

It is not that achievement standards are inappropriate. They are very desirable, but they are not sufficient. We must continue to refine them by pairing down to essential

expectations and adding clarity where needed. In addition, they must be ordered in learning progressions to unfold in each subject over time within and across grade levels in a manner that supports learning. Further, each standard must be deconstructed in the scaffolding students will climb on during their learning to get there. It is never the case that, first students haven't mastered a standard and then all of a sudden they can. Rather, over time they progress through ascending levels of proficiency until they reach the standard. It is the levels of the ascent that classroom assessments must reflect. Without them, teachers will remain unable to assess productively during the learning. And finally, those classroom-level (scaffolding) learning targets must be transformed into student-friendly versions which teachers are prepared to share with their students from the very beginning of the learning.

How do we close the achievement gap if we have no clear map of the learning continuum along which it exists? We cannot. We must do this work as a key foundation for the development of balanced assessment systems.

Responsibility for these refinements resides with states and local school districts. This is not work that can be done on an individual teacher-by-teacher basis. Qualified state teams or subcommittees of local professional learning communities can refine standards into learning progressions, deconstruct each standard into scaffolding, and prepare student- and even family-friendly versions of achievement expectations. Then faculties can benefit from this work.

### **3. Assure Classroom Assessment Quality**

The following beliefs must be abandoned, as all are wrong: Classroom assessments already are of high quality and so they need no attention; the quality of classroom assessments doesn't matter; or, we buy quality assessments with our instructional programs. Once a decade for six decades, systematic reviews of research have decried the quality of classroom assessments from all sources. The problem, as we already have established and will continue to assert below, is that critically important instructional decisions that bear directly on student well-being are made on the basis of evidence gathered day to day via classroom assessment.

Yet, we have made literally no investment in assuring either their quality or effective use in the service of student success. Pre-service programs continue to neglect this facet of the professional preparation and in-service opportunities remain very rare, both for teachers and principals.

Yet, the promise of positive impact for students remains high. Achievement gains of a half a standard deviation and more have been reported in conjunction with improvement of classroom assessment, with the largest gains accruing for low achievers. (Black and Wiliam, 1998)

How do teachers accommodate differences in the needs of students within their classrooms—to close the gap between those who succeed and those who struggle to meet standards—if they don't have access to dependable day-to-day evidence of differences in their students' current levels of achievement? They cannot. Pre-service and ongoing professional development opportunities are essentials. University programs and school leaders must step up immediately and show the way by providing essential learning opportunities.

#### **4. Turn Learners in to Assessors**

The belief to abandon in this case is that assessment is something that adults do to students. It's not that adults don't assess. But once again, that perspective is inappropriately narrow. Adults aren't the only ones who assess students. Students assess themselves too. The phrasing is critical here. It's not that students can assess themselves. They do so and continuously. They rely on their interpretation of their own results to inform some very important instructional decisions, such as these:

- Can I learn this or am I just too dense?
- Is the learning worth the energy I will have to expend to attain it?
- Is trying worth the risk that I might fail...again...in public?

If students come down on the wrong side of these decisions, it doesn't matter what the adults in their lives decide for them. The learning stops.

The critical background question is, can the adults in the student's life help students always come down on the right—the productive—side of these issues? And the answer is clearly, yes we can. This calls for the consistent application of principles and practices of classroom assessment FOR learning. Those practices call for teachers to help students understand what good work looks like from the very beginning of the learning, help students learn to self assess by comparing their work to that standard of excellence so as to see the differences, and help students learn how to close the gap between the two (Sadler, 1989 as developed in Chappuis, in press). Once again, when these principles play out as a matter of routine in classrooms, profound achievement gains result with the largest gains for low achievers.

But also, once again, we confront the assessment problem of the decades: teachers have not been given the opportunity to learn to apply principles and practices of assessment FOR learning. So the locus of action resides with pre-service university programs and local professional development programs to provide those opportunities.

How is it possible to close the achievement gap if struggling learners are left to interpret their low scores as evidence of the inevitability of their failure—if they consistently are deciding to give up in hopelessness? Obviously, it is not.

#### **5. Provide Descriptive Feedback**

The time has come to stop believing that report card grades and test scores represent effective communication capable of supporting student learning. They do not—indeed, cannot. It's not that they cannot provide indications of learning success or failure. But a recent summary of research on the characteristics of feedback that supports learning reveals why they fall short as supporters of learning.

Hattie and Temperly (2007) report that research reveals that feedback works to encourage and support student learning when it does the following:

- Focuses on attributes of the student’s work rather than attributes of the student as a learner (“here is how to make your writing more effective” rather than “just try harder”)
- Is descriptive of that work, revealing to the student how to do better the next time, rather than judgmental
- Is clearly understood by the intended user, leading to specific inferences as to what is needed
- Is sufficiently detailed to be helpful yet not so comprehensive as to overwhelm
- Arrives in time to inform the learning, versus too late

Effective communication systems rely on descriptive feedback to support learning balanced with judgmental feedback to verify it. Once again, Hattie and his associate report, we see profound achievement gains (as much as three quarters of a standard deviation) in instances where descriptive feedback supports learning. So once again, this places teachers at the heart of sound practice, as they are the only educators who can provide what is needed.

But alas, the teachers and principals who are in a position to act are not trained to apply principles of effective communication. So these gains in student success remain beyond reach. Responsibility once again resides with those who assure that teachers and principals bring appropriate levels of assessment literacy with them to the workplace.

## **6. Build the Confidence of All Learners**

We must abandon the belief that the intimidation of accountability serves as a productive motivator for all learners. Clearly, it motivates some but certainly not all—maybe not even most. The use of intimidation to increase anxiety only works to spur productive action for those who have hope of success. For all who have given up in hopelessness, it simply drives them deeper into despair.

The one dynamic that does work as a motivator is success at learning and the promise that more success might be in the offing. The simple fact is that if we want all students to meet standards (and we already have established that such success is essential) then they must all believe that success is within reach for them if they try. The critical new insight about assessment is, what students think about and do with assessment results is every bit as important as what the adults think about and do with those results.

More precisely, the student’s emotional response to assessment results in any context will determine what that student does about those results. We must remember who is in charge of the learning, and it is not the teacher. Students respond in an emotionally productive manner when, upon seeing those results (whether high, mid-range or low) the student says: “I get it—I know what these results mean. I know what to do in response to do better the next time. I can handle this. I choose to keep trying.” Students respond in a counterproductive manner when their reaction is: “I don’t understand. I have no idea what to do about this. I’m probably too dumb to get this anyway. I give up.” If a student has yet to meet standards and ends up in this emotional place, turning up the anxiety through increased intimidation is exactly the wrong thing to do. Rather, if we

cannot get this student to some level of success on the journey to competence, that student is doomed to inevitable failure.

How do we close the achievement gap between those who have and have not met standards if we cannot bring all students to believe that success is within their reach? The answer is, we cannot.

Once again, the solution resides in the application of the principles and practices of assessment FOR learning, the demonstrated source of renewed student confidence, motivation and learning success. If only teachers and principals could gain access to those proven practices...

## **7. Promote Assessment Literacy**

To summarize, how do we help students attain maximum learning success when

- Classroom assessment are unable to fulfill their role as the foundation of a balanced assessment system?
- We have inadequate curricular roadmaps for the journey to learning success?
- Assessments may be producing inaccurate information about student learning day to day in the classroom?
- Struggling learners are making counterproductive decisions that all but guarantee they will fail?
- The feedback strategies we use merely verify learning or the lack of it (are judgmental) rather than actually supporting the learning (describe the path to success)?
- Some learners are giving up on themselves in hopelessness?

The plain answer is, we cannot.

To counter this, we need to abandon the beliefs that teachers and principals either are assessment literate already or don't need to be. Both are wrong. The typical teacher will spend a quarter to a third of her or his available professional time engaged in assessment-related activities. If it is done well, the evidence is compelling: all students prosper, but especially struggling learners. If it is done poorly, all students suffer. The vast majority of teachers and school leaders carry out their assessment practices with neither the confidence nor competence needed to do so productively to support student learning. We either provide practitioners with the opportunity to learn, or, regardless of whatever else we do, the gap between those who meet and don't meet our standards will remain stubbornly wide.

## References

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