Time for a New View of Assessment

By Penny Barfield-Venet

An assessment activity can help learning if it provides information to be used as feedback by teachers, and by their students in assessing themselves and each other, to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Such assessment becomes formative assessment when the evidence is used to adapt the teaching work to meet learning needs.

—From Assessment for Learning by Paul Black, Christine Harrison, Clare Lee, Bethan Marshall, and Dylan Wiliam, page 2.

In a previous issue of Alliance Access, I wrote “I’ve been uneasy about assessment for years.” The statement still holds true for me today, but for slightly different reasons. Then I was trying to explain my need to devote nearly a decade to the study of assessment. My uneasiness began as a classroom teacher and continued even after I had become the director of assessment for a large urban district.

During that time, I witnessed how tests could shape instruction and affect student learning in less than beneficial ways. I also learned how teaching, learning, and assessment are deeply connected, and how continual assessment, in a variety of forms, provides the full range of information that teachers require to meet the learning needs of all students.

While I may still be uneasy about assessment, I am also hopeful that the current research in the field is changing the way many educators view assessment and its role in the classroom. Recently, through Regional Alliance workshops and seminars, I have witnessed the enthusiasm with which administrators, teachers, and policy makers seek to learn more about formative assessment and in particular the research presented in Assessment for Learning by Paul Black, Christine Harrison, Clare Lee, Bethan Marshall, and Dylan Wiliam.

This issue of Alliance Access presents recent research on assessment along with suggested resources for learning more. “Formative Assessment: The Basics,” page 2, includes working definitions for the term and a summary of current research findings. In “New Assessment Beliefs for a New School Mission,” Rick Stiggins articulates a vision of assessment that blends standardized and classroom assessments into a synergistic system (page 4).

Recognizing the enormous pressures teachers and administrators face to raise test scores, I once again offer some tips for relieving test stress. The tips can help students perform at their best and allow teachers to devote more time to finding out what students know on an ongoing basis (page 14).
Formative Assessment: The Basics

Formative assessment describes the systematic and regular measurement of students’ progress in the classroom and the process by which the results are used to inform instructional practice. Assessment results must be used to adapt teaching to meet students’ learning needs. The primary objective of a formative assessment system is to guide instruction rather than measure where students are at the end of an instruction period, which is the purpose of summative assessment.

When used regularly, formative assessments provide essential information to teachers and school administrators in the planning and delivery of instruction. Formative assessment acts as a guide and early warning system for monitoring the progress of individuals and groups of students toward grade-level targets. Effective and regular use of formative assessment produces significant learning gains.

Raising Student Achievement

In 1998, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam of Kings College, London, examined the international literature on assessment, asking if there was evidence that the use of formative (classroom) assessments raised student achievement, as reflected in periodic summative assessments.

inside the Black Box (1998a) provides firm evidence that formative assessment is an essential component of classroom work and that its development can raise standards of achievement. More than 20 of the 250 studies showed that the practice of regular formative assessment, in conjunction with instruction based on individual needs, produced significant learning gains. The studies included a range of age groups from five-year-olds to university graduates.

A scientific method was used to evaluate the results by comparing the average improvements in the test scores of the students who experienced the use of formative assessment with the range of scores found among groups of students who had not experienced the use of formative assessment. Typical effect sizes for the formative assessment experimental groups were between 0.4 and 0.7. These effect sizes are larger than most of those found for educational interventions (Black & Wiliam, 1998b).

Closing the Learning Gap for Low-Achieving Students

Use of formative assessments closes the learning gap for low-achieving students. One of the truly remarkable aspects of formative assessment is that it is appropriate for all students. For example, Bergan, Sladeczek, and Schwarz (1991) found that a rigorous formative assessment routine helped kindergarten children from disadvantaged homes in six different regions of the United States achieve significantly higher scores in several core subject areas compared with a control group. Comparable results were found with middle-school students and science learning (Frederiksen & White, 1997), and with college students in an introductory algebra course (Martinez & Martinez, 1992).

While formative assessment can help all pupils, it yields particularly good results with low-achieving students. Many of the studies reported that formative assessment helps low achievers more than other students, thus closing the gap between low- and high-performing students while raising achievement overall (Black & Wiliam, 1998).
Formative assessment helps support the expectation that all children can learn at high levels. It counteracts the cycle in which students attribute poor performance to lack of ability, and therefore become discouraged and unwilling to invest in further learning (Boston, 2002).

Formative assessment fosters student responsibility for learning. Perhaps the most unrecognized aspect of appropriate formative assessment is the role of students, their motivations, and self-perception (Sadler, 1989). When students perceive assessment as supportive rather than punitive, they are more likely to take responsibility for their own learning and use the results of assessment to modify their own behaviors. Students consider traditional summative assessment as something outside their control. In contrast, students view well-designed formative assessments positively.

Black and Wiliam (1998a) provided extensive and detailed research to support the use of formative assessment to ensure student learning. Three summary statements provide simple guidance for educators with regard to the use of formative assessment.

1. Frequent short tests are better than infrequent long ones.
2. New learning should be tested within a week of first exposure.
3. The quality of the test items is essential.

References


When students perceive assessment as supportive rather than punitive, they are more likely to take responsibility for their own learning...


This overview was prepared by Penny Barchfeld-Venot, Regional Alliance Assessment Specialist.
New Assessment Beliefs for a New School Mission

By Rick Suggs

In recent years, we have achieved major breakthroughs in our understanding of the effective use of assessment to benefit—not merely check for—student learning. We have gained new insights into cognitive processes and have succeeded in connecting them to new assessment strategies that promise unprecedented achievement gains for students. Yet in districts, schools, and classrooms across the nation, educators still assess student learning the way their predecessors did 60 years ago because they have not been given the opportunity to learn about these new insights and practices.

The time has come to take advantage of this new understanding of the potential of assessment and to fundamentally rethink the relationship between assessment practices and effective schools in the United States. For decades, beginning with districtwide testing in the 1960s and subsequently expanding to statewide, national, and international testing, we have believed that the path to school improvement is paved with more and better standardized tests. The mistake we have made at all levels is to believe that once-a-year standardized assessments alone can provide sufficient information and motivation to increase student learning.

In fact, this belief in the power of standardized testing has blinded public officials and school leaders to a completely different application of assessment—day-to-day classroom assessment—that has been shown to trigger remarkable gains in student achievement. Before discussing the evidence of the power of classroom assessment, it is useful to examine the specific reasons why standardized tests are insufficient as the foundation for assessment’s role in our school improvement efforts.

The Naive and Counterproductive Assessment Legacy

Let me be clear about my mission here. The arguments I advance do not arise from a desire to end accountability oriented standardized testing. Such tests do provide opportunities for educators to reflect on what is and is not being achieved. If educators don’t take advantage of these opportunities, it is not the fault of the tests. I will suggest specific ways for users to take far greater advantage of standardized tests in the future. But for assessment to become truly useful, politicians, school leaders, and society in general must come to understand the gross insufficiency of these tests as a basis for assessment for school improvement.

My argument is not with the idea of accountability per se. As public institutions under contract with their communities to help students learn, schools should be compelled to present evidence that they are doing their job. If standardized tests can provide part of that evidence, we should use them. Besides, the demand for accountability is helping educators clarify achievement expectations. This has already produced dividends in the form of focused standards—a solid foundation for greater student success—and the development of standards-referenced tests. When carefully developed, such tests provide educators with the assurance that good instruction will result in higher scores.

My argument is with those who believe that standardized testing for public accountability harnesses the full power of assessment in the service of better schools. I can find little evidence that this is the case. My quest for research on the effects of high-stakes tests per se on student achievement has yielded just one study that directly addresses this question. Margaret Raymond and Eric Hanushek report tiny test score gains attributable to the presence of high-stakes tests. But at the same time, Audrey Amrein and David Berliner, among others, report that such tests are often accompanied
by such negative outcomes as reduced achievement, increased dropout rates, and reduced graduation rates — especially for minority students. In fact, Robert Linn, for decades an international leader in the development of large-scale tests for all levels, laments the inability of these tests to improve school quality and student well-being:

As someone who has spent his entire career doing research, writing and thinking about educational testing and assessment issues, I would like to conclude by summarizing a compelling case showing that the major uses of tests for student and school accountability during the past 50 years have improved education and student learning in dynamic ways. Unfortunately, that is not my conclusion.

In a similar vein, Lorrie Shepard, an assessment expert whose international stature parallels Linn’s, issues a more stinging indictment:

The negative effects of high-stakes testing on teaching and learning are well known. Under intense political pressure, testing scores are likely to go up without a corresponding improvement in student learning. In fact, distortions in what and how students are taught may actually decrease students’ conceptual understanding.

So our investment of billions of dollars over six decades in district, state, national, and international testing for accountability has produced scant evidence that these tests have increased student achievement or provided the motivation to learn. At the same time, we have seen mounting evidence of great harm for some segments of our student population.

I believe this lack of demonstrably positive impact arises from the fact that our assessment systems have been built on a fundamentally flawed set of beliefs about how to use assessment for educational improvement. These mistaken beliefs have forced educators to approach standardized testing far more as a matter of compliance with political demands for test scores than as a matter of pedagogy. While this may not have been the intent, it has become the reality.

A Legacy of Mistaken Beliefs

I will cite four commonly held beliefs about the use of assessment as a school improvement tool, all of which I will argue are wrong. I will state why and then suggest remedies that promise to bring the full force of assessment to bear on school improvement.

Mistaken belief 1. High-stakes standardized tests are good for all students because they motivate them to learn.

In recent years, we have witnessed increasing reliance on standardized tests of ever more rigorous academic standards that are connected to high-stakes promotion and graduation decisions. Admittedly, the primary intent of these accountability-oriented assessments is to pressure educators to teach more effectively. But clearly, this pressure is being passed on to students as well. This represents the educational expression of a deep-seated societal value—when the going gets tough, the tough get going. By intensifying the pressure to succeed, we strive to cause students to try harder and learn more.

The Impact

Raising the bar to world-class standards assessed by high-stakes tests will cause students to try harder only if they believe that increased effort will lead to success. Typically, students who believe they already have a demonstrated record of learning success. They have developed into confident learners who believe they can become even more successful in the future. At the very least, they believe the chances that they will succeed are high enough to justify taking the risk of trying.

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Now consider those students whose academic record reveals a chronic history of failure. Their reality is different. For them, the realization that the bar is going even higher—that now it will be even more difficult to succeed in school—is neither invigorating nor motivating. On the contrary, it is deflating, discouraging, and defeating. These students will regard the entire movement to embrace high standards and high-stakes testing and the intimidation-driven school improvement process as representing yet another occasion when they lose. They will see the new higher standards as unattainable and will give up in hopelessness. This is why dropout rates increase and graduation rates decline as the stakes go higher.

When a child goes through such an experience, the high-stakes test of world-class standards has exactly the opposite effect of the one that society and politicians desire or expect. Instead, the testing program leads to greater failure for many of our students, particularly our minority students. I believe the fact that this type of assessment has destroyed the motivation of as many students as it has encouraged has contributed to the lack of demonstrable positive impact of high-stakes, standardized testing over the decades.

A more productive belief.
High-stakes tests without supportive classroom assessment environments harm struggling students.

The crucial question is, What exactly is our responsibility regarding these failing students? Shall we merely write them off as collateral damage in the school improvement wars? Please realize that the schools from which most of today’s adults graduated did exactly that.

Our schools were designed to sort us from the lowest to the highest achievers in order to channel us into the various segments of our social and economic system. Our grades were used to rank us: there are the winners, and the devil take the hindmost. Back then, if students gave up in hopelessness, it was a good thing, for they would learn even less and easily fill the very lowest ranks. The greater the distance between the top and bottom of the grade distribution, the more dependable would be the rank order.

But in recent years, our society has changed to a school mission that places educators clearly in the service of the success of all students. We began to realize that if all schools do is sort students, then the bottom third of the rank order plus all those who drop out before being ranked will fail to develop the essential reading, writing, and math proficiencies needed to survive in an increasingly complex society. So over the past few decades, the mission of sorting has evolved into a mission of ensuring certain minimal competencies. Now schools are to “leave no child behind”; that is, they are to help all students meet state standards and become competent readers, writers, and problem solvers as demonstrated by appropriately high scores on state assessments. Given this new mission, if some students regard those standards as unattainable, feel hopeless, and stop trying, it is a very bad thing. Those who stop trying stop learning. Those who stop learning fail to meet the standards that reflect the skills and knowledge needed by our society.

What, if anything, can schools do to prevent this hopelessness and loss? The answer is not to eliminate high-stakes tests. Rather, it is to build learning environments that help all students believe that they can succeed at hitting the target if they keep trying. We understand how to use classroom assessment to keep students confident that the achievement target is within reach. We know that high-stakes tests help only when accompanied by learning environments that consciously set students up for high-stakes success. I provide details below.
Mistaken belief 2. It is the instructional decisions of adults that contribute the most to student learning and school effectiveness.

We have built our assessment traditions and systems—indeed, the entire accountability movement and the more recent data-driven decision-making frameworks—on the belief that it is the instructional decisions of the adults in our classrooms, schools, districts, and states that determine school effectiveness. We have invested literally all of our assessment resources—billions of dollars across all grade levels and over decades—to provide these adults with the assessment results they need to make sound instructional decisions, utterly and completely ignoring the students as users.

The Impact

Our collective assessment history includes no acknowledgment what so ever of students as assessment users or instructional decision makers. Without question, maximum learning comes from productive interactions between teachers and students. In fact, both must share the responsibility for making schools effective. Clearly, adults make major contributions to the process. But in a normative sense, those adult decisions are not nearly as important in terms of their impact on learning as are the decisions students themselves make.

Students decide whether they are smart enough to meet standards, whether they have any reason to hope for success if they try. They decide whether meeting the standards is worth the required effort. They decide whether it is safe to try in the face of uncertainty—whether they are likely to succeed or be embarrassed by public failure. And they base these decisions on their own view of their personal history of academic success or failure.

The time has come for us adults to deepen our understanding of the relationship between assessment and student success from the student’s perspective. For us, a test score becomes an entry in the gradebook or a report of scores received by a test-scoring service. We see scores as comparable and, therefore, as something we can average across students in a given classroom, school, district, or state. We see scores as a means to comply with reporting requirements—grades to parents, score reports to the state department of education, reports of student performance to the media, and so on.

We must build classroom environments in which students use assessments to understand what success looks like...

But for students, the score or grade represents something far more important—far more personal. The score or grade provides the information by which students decide whether or how they fit into the world of writers, readers, or math-problem solvers. Students read the score as evidence of whether success is even within reach for them. And their decisions often have long-term implications.

A more productive belief: Students are crucial instructional decision makers whose information needs must be met.

We must stop being so adult-centered in our thinking about assessment. We must build classroom environments in which students use assessments to understand what success looks like and how to do better the next time. In effect, we must help students use ongoing classroom assessment to take responsibility for their own academic success.

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Mistaken belief 3. The instructional decisions that have the greatest impact on student learning are those made once a year.

If we regard the manner in which we have spent virtually all of our assessment dollars over the past 60 years as evidence of our beliefs about what will have the greatest impact on student learning, then we must conclude that once-a-year decisions informed by once-a-year standardized tests are the only ones that we have believed would improve school quality. The only assessments we have invested in are multilayered standardized tests, which speaks volumes about our unwavering belief that the once-a-year decisions made centrally by program planners based on once-a-year test scores drive school quality. If we had believed otherwise, we would have invested otherwise.

**The Impact**

Obviously, no one (including me) actually believes that school quality turns only on once-a-year instructional decision making. We make instructional decisions in a variety of contexts with varying frequency—some based on standardized tests and others on classroom assessments—all of which can assist student learning. But given our tunnel-vision investment in standardized tests, as outlined here, if there are other assessment users at other levels of instructional decision making who need access to different forms of evidence with differing frequency, those information needs have been completely ignored.

We have not invested in ensuring the accuracy of classroom assessments. Thus the chances of inaccurate assessment and therefore ineffective decision making at all other levels dearly increase. The negative impact of this process on student learning is obvious. And better, faster, cheaper, more precise once-a-year assessments cannot rectify the resulting problems. I submit that this has contributed to the lack of a demonstrable relationship between testing per se and school improvement.

A more productive belief. The instructional decisions that have the greatest impact are made day to day in the classroom.

Many of the most crucial instructional decisions are made by students and teachers not once a year but every few minutes. Students decide if success is within reach and how to go about attaining it. Teachers diagnose student needs, allocate time, design and implement instructional interventions, judge student work, and assign grades. Without question, both need continuous access to evidence of student learning arising from high-quality classroom assessment.

Yet we cannot provide it because our assessment beliefs and traditions have included no attention to the accuracy or effective use of day-to-day classroom assessment. Indeed, the evolution of assessment in this country reveals no awareness or acknowledgment of the primacy of assessment at this level.

The new belief is to acknowledge the critical importance of classroom assessment and provide teachers the tools they need to build classroom environments that promote learning through continuous student-involved assessment, record-keeping, and communication.

Mistaken belief 4. Teachers and administrators don’t need to know about and understand the principles of sound assessment practice—the professional testing people will take care of that for us.
If we had believed that it is important for practitioners to assess accurately at all times, including each day in the classroom, and to use assessments to inform important instructional decisions, then we would have provided them with the opportunity to learn to do so. Instead, we have invested in making sure that others—not the teachers—do the testing. In fact, our collective assessment actions over the past 60 years reveal a fundamental lack of trust in teachers and school leaders to accurately assess the achievement of their students. Society has demanded objective, third-party evidence of learning so that professional educators can’t manipulate the data in their own favor. The record shows that we assumed that this use of assessment for accountability would be sufficient to meet our evidentiary needs. Obviously, it has not sufficed.

Decades ago, we separated assessment from instruction, assigned the tasks to different people, and built a wall between them. We told teachers to teach and not to worry about assessment: someone else will cover that. And we likewise told assessment people: you test and you don’t need to know anything about teaching.

The Impact

As a result of this apparent lack of understanding of the connection between assessment and instruction, teacher licensing laws have failed to require competence in assessment as a condition of licensure to teach. Thus teacher preparation programs have failed to weave assessment training into their curriculum. The same pattern has evolved in our preparation of school leaders. So in 2004 we remain a national faculty unschooled in the principles of sound assessment practice. We have those who teach and those who assess, and never the twain shall meet.

In addition, rather than providing teachers with the professional development they need to manage the assessment process effectively, some districts try to circumvent the problem by providing teachers with the tests they need. It’s just that those assessments are often developed in the absence of quality control and so can be inaccurate. And on top of this, untrained teachers may develop their own inaccurate assessments. In either case, the evidence used to inform day-to-day instructional decisions may frequently be invalid. The consequent incorrect decisions are apt to lead to counterproductive actions taken on behalf of student learning. And once-a-year tests and corresponding annual instructional decision making cannot overcome the negative consequences for students.

A more productive belief. Teachers must possess and be ready to apply knowledge of sound classroom assessment practices.

The typical teacher will spend one-quarter to one-third of his or her professional time involved in assessment-related activities. If teachers assess accurately and use the results effectively, then students prosper. If they do it poorly, student learning suffers. And it has. Therefore, the new belief must be that, without question, teachers need to know and understand the principles of sound assessment. The evidence of student learning they gather each day influences the most crucial instructional decisions. The remedy to our current situation is to offer targeted, productive professional development to put the available classroom assessment wisdom into the hands of practitioners.

Building Our Assessment Future Around New Beliefs

As we look to our future, if we wish to create a different reality and tap the full potential of assessment as our ally in improving student learning, we must refocus our efforts around a new overarching assessment belief: we must strike a balance between standardized tests of learning and classroom assessment for learning.
Assessment systems that balance these purposes make use of an array of assessments and differentiate among the information needs of all assessment users. When systems are in balance, assessments at all levels are derived from the same set of achievement standards, but they treat those standards differently. For instance, classroom assessments provide a continuous flow of evidence of student mastery of the classroom-level learning targets that lead over time to attainment of the desired achievement standards. As assessments for learning, they inform instructional decisions along the way to success. Standardized tests, on the other hand, provide periodic evidence of student mastery of the standards themselves. As assessments of learning, they verify arrival at success.

In a balanced system, all assessments provide dependable information about student achievement, regardless of who developed the tests or where they are used. That is, we can count on standardized tests to accurately evaluate performance toward our achievement standards because we pay to have them developed by professionals who are expert in developing high-quality assessments. And, in such a system, we have the same confidence in classroom assessments because we invest in professional development to ensure that teachers possess the wisdom needed to create high-quality day-to-day assessments.

In systems where we take full advantage of assessment for learning, we also see balance among the participants in the assessment process. Teachers involve their students in classroom assessment, record-keeping, and communication during learning. But when it’s time for students to be accountable for what they have learned, the teacher takes the lead in conducting assessments of learning.

Finally, in balanced systems, care is taken to ensure that reporting procedures deliver assessment results into the hands of the various intended users of the information in a timely and understandable manner, regardless of the purpose for the assessment (for or for learning) or the origin of the results (classroom or standardized assessment).

How Would Balance Affect Achievement

Extensive research on the impact of effective classroom assessment on student achievement has demonstrated remarkable gains of a full standard deviation or more in student scores on subsequent assessments of learning. Studies have demonstrated that assessment for learning rivals one-on-one tutoring in its effectiveness and that the use of assessment particularly benefits the achievement of low-performing students. The latter finding has direct implications for districts seeking to reduce achievement gaps between minorities and other students.

And the evidence continues to accumulate. Achievement gains of the magnitude seen in the research on balanced assessment are unprecedented in the literature of school improvement.

Balance Is Within Reach

As a direct result of lessons learned over the past two decades, we understand how to blend standardized and classroom assessment into a synergistic system—how to help them work in harmony. We have standardized assessments of learning already in place. If school leaders were given the opportunity to learn more about how to use this type of assessment, they would be prepared to take advantage of standardized test results in making crucial instructional decisions. It is paradoxical that we have invested so heavily in the creation of these tests yet have invested nothing to ensure their proper use.

We also understand how to use classroom assessment to trigger large achievement gains. We can accomplish this through deep student involvement in day-to-day classroom assessment, record-keeping, and communication.

The Assessment Training Institute helps K–12 educators improve student achievement by combining student-involved classroom assessment with day-to-day instruction.

To learn more about Assessment Training Institute’s professional development programs, training materials and leadership training visit www.assessmentinst.com.
Through student involvement in classroom assessment, we can focus students on a clear path to ultimate success. If we engage students in continuous self-assessment over time, we can keep them believing that success is within reach if they keep striving. And if we provide them with the opportunity to use this evidence to tell the story of their success, such as in student-led parent/teacher conferences, we can tap a well-spring of confidence and motivation to learn that resides naturally within each student.

All that we lack now are the political will and the professional development resources needed to place these very powerful assessment tools into the hands of teachers and administrators. We have the ability to implement an exciting new vision of excellence in assessment that manifests four new beliefs.

- **Our job is to set students up for high-stakes success by helping them believe in themselves as learners.**

- **We must acknowledge that students are assessment users and use assessment to help them discover gifts they didn’t know they had.**

- **Crucial instructional decisions are made in the classroom every day, not just once a year, and must be based on accurate evidence of learning for the sake of student success.**

- **All educators absolutely must understand and use sound assessment practices.**

In short, we know how to use classroom assessment to make success a driving force in the learning life of every student. We no longer need to accept the assessment legacy of our past. We know better.


“The typical teacher will spend one-quarter to one-third of his or her professional time involved in assessment-related activities.”


Rick Stiggins is the founder of Assessment Training Institute, Inc., Portland, Oregon.
Relieving Test Stress

Many people think of assessment as separate from the learning process. Perhaps the desire to isolate assessment stems from our personal experiences with assessment. Maybe we remember tension around testing situations. We can easily pass that tension on to our students. The anxiety about testing has increased greatly and is unlikely to diminish soon in our high-stakes testing environment. How can we reduce the impact of this stress on students and allow them to perform at their best?

“...The school atmosphere and teachers’ attitudes have a deep influence on how kids experience testing."

The pressure to raise test scores quickly can tempt all of us—administrators, teachers, and students—to adopt some pretty toxic coping strategies. Unfortunately, one strategy is cheating. Students may pass test papers back and forth during exams or peek at each others’ papers. Overly “helpful” test administrators may stress important words, reread questions extend time, or even change answers. Fortunately, these cheating strategies are easy to identify.

Less obvious forms of cheating might include holding low-scoring kids back a year so they will perhaps test better the next year; classifying more kids as “special needs” to exempt them from testing; and “prepping” only borderline scorers at the expense of low-scoring kids in order to influence the overall school rating.

However, the coping strategy that may have the most damaging and long-term effects is sacrificing real instruction for a test prep curriculum.

There are some healthy ways to alleviate test stress. The school atmosphere and teachers’ attitudes have a deep influence on how kids experience testing. Schools want to make the testing experience as calm and uneventful as possible so that kids can show what they know on the test.

The following is a list of ideas that can make the test experience less stressful and more equitable. Most of these suggestions are short-term, mechanical solutions that, at best, might produce a small improvement in achievement test scores. Short-term solutions can never substitute for real instructional change and focused, formative assessment techniques.

Create a Comfort Zone for All

• Make sure that all members of the staff, including aides, prep teachers, and counselors, know the test schedule and recognize the need for a positive atmosphere. Every adult in the building can help.

• Share information with parents so they can support their kids to be well prepared. This is a team effort.

• Make the mechanics of testing as simple as possible. Have staff help the test coordinator make sure that all the necessary materials (pencils, booklets, scratch paper, and answer sheets) are counted, ready, and bundled for distribution and collection each day.

• Keep good records of attendance to give all students every opportunity for make-ups. Also, keep notes of behaviors or illnesses that might influence a student’s success. When the scores return, knowing that Mandy’s grandmother had been seriously ill the week before testing may explain any unexpected results.

• Have an end-of-testing sundae party or celebration.

• Learn how other teachers have kept kids calm and monitored administration in years past.

Provide Common Sense Supports

• Check all test materials provided by the state or publisher for suggestions on what you can do to help the kids.
• As a mathematics or science term is used in a lesson, post the word on a wall (just the word, not the definition). Students can record this vocabulary in learning journals and refer to it as time passes to keep new terms familiar.

• Provide practice with being timed, so that students’ first experience with timing is not on the high-stakes test. Have students solve problems with timed limits and talk about how to work more efficiently.

• Provide practice with expected test formats on a limited basis, just enough so that kids know how to use a separate answer sheet and answer multiple-choice questions.

• Practice in-school reading and analysis of problems together. Model reflective responses to open-ended questions.

• Check the record of every special needs student for recommended accommodations and use them throughout the year. Test time should not be the first time a student sees the accommodation they require.

These actions should be taken in all schools for all kids, though they are challenging in our current school environment. Remember, these steps are only improvements to the testing environment. The real work of integrating assessment and learning begins when schools and teachers study the alignment of what’s expected to be taught with what’s actually being taught, and with what’s being tested. If kids aren’t being exposed to the body of knowledge that’s tested, they have little chance of being successful. Also, if the knowledge is taught on a broad skill-based level and the assessment deals with conceptual understanding or problem solving, the student is again at risk of not being able to perform well. Strong classroom formative assessment and clear learning intentions will lead to improved learning and performance.

Penny Barnesfeld-Venet is the Regional Alliance Assessment Specialist.

Understanding School Assessment
A Parent and Community Guide to Helping Students Learn

By Jan Chappuis and Steve Chappuis

We have written this book for parents, educators, and community members with the goal of increasing understanding about assessment in schools, and more specifically about the important role classroom assessment can play in school improvement. Parents and the broader community constitute the largest audience for assessment results, and as such, we believe the information you receive ought to be clear and understandable. Beyond that, we want to prepare you to be critical consumers of assessment results. To that end, our purpose is to share what we think parents and community members ought to know about assessment practices that will maximize student success in school. — Jan and Steve Chappuis. From the Introduction to Understanding School Assessment.

In this guide the authors detail which assessment practices have been proven to increase student learning, and how to recognize if these practices are in place in your schools. They explore these issues and others central to improving schools. Written for parents and community members, the guide describes what you should know about standardized testing as well as assessment practices in the classroom that will help all children learn at higher levels.

Assessment Training Institute, 800.480.3060, www.assessmentinst.com
Active Assessment for Active Science: A Guide for Elementary School Teachers by George E. Hein and Sabra L. Price

Although there are several new books about alternate, authentic, or performance-based assessment, few focus on science assessment and provide practical information on developing, interpreting, and scoring these new alternatives to traditional tests.

This book combines practical discussion with theoretical information on the rationale for active assessments. It enables classroom teachers to develop and score their own assessments and answers the following questions:

• Why should you use active science assessments?

• What kinds of assessments are there?

• How do you manage these assessments in the classroom?

• What evidence of learning can you find in written student work?

• How do national curriculum developers develop assessments?

• How do you score them?

• How do assessments tie in with educational values?

The book’s numerous classroom examples of assessments and student work provide teachers and staff developers with materials for workshops as well as individual reflection.

Heinemann, 800.225.5800, www.heinemann.com

Assessment FOR Learning: An Action Guide for School Leaders by Steve Chappuis, Rick Suggins, Judy Arter, and Jan Chappuis

Assessment FOR Learning: An Action Guide for School Leaders is Assessment Training Institute’s professional development tool specifically written as a guide to help school leaders design and implement effective, district-wide classroom assessment practices.

In addition to defining a vision of what excellence in assessment looks like, this book provides tools to analyze the status of your current assessment system, helps chart a path to accomplish that vision, and identifies the knowledge requirement and the specific competencies needed by leaders to support assessment for learning.

Assessment Training Institute, 800.480.3060, www.assessmentinst.com

Classroom Assessment for Student Learning: Doing It Right—Using It Well by Richard Stiggins, Judy Arter, Jan Chappuis, and Steve Chappuis

This book is grounded in the research shown to improve student motivation and learning through improved classroom assessment. A combination text and workbook, it:

• provides practical examples of what assessment for learning looks like in everyday instruction

• helps educators increase their knowledge and skill in student-involved classroom assessment

• comes with hands-on practice for the classroom and is presented in a format for use in collaborative learning teams

• contains additional resources on a CD-ROM, and video segments on the accompanying DVD.

Assessment Training Institute, 800.480.3060, www.assessmentinst.com

Everyday Assessment in the Science Classroom edited by J. Myron Akin and Janet E. Coffey

This collection of 10 essays on the theories behind the latest assessment techniques is designed to build confidence and enhance every teacher’s ability to embed assessment into daily class work. It offers in-depth “how to” suggestions on conducting assessments as a matter of routine—especially in light of high-stakes standards-based exams, using assessment to improve instruction, and involving students in the assessment process.

The book’s insights will help make assessment a dynamic classroom process of fine tuning how and what you teach... drawing students into discussions about learning, establishing criteria, doing self-assessment, and setting goals for what they will learn.

NSTA press, 800.277.5300, store.nsta.org

Finding the Connections: Linking Assessment, Instruction, and Curriculum in Elementary Mathematics by Jean Moon and Linda Schulman

Jean Moon and Linda Schulman offer practitioners a new approach to assessment—one that is comprehensive, practical, and interactive. Recognizing the process-oriented nature of alternative assessment, they contend that the more we “do” alternative assessment, the more we learn about it. Their book encourages and enhances that “doing” process.

Finding the Connections emphasizes the conceptual links among assessment, instruction, and curriculum,
focusing on classroom practices in grades K–6. It provides a model for integrating assessment with instruction; ideas for communicating with parents, students, and administrators; and guided opportunities to practice and reflect upon the assessment process. By sharing their experiences, the authors also help readers develop their own assessment methods.

Classroom teachers, mathematics educators, mathematics specialists, curriculum developers, administrators, and other practitioners interested in the general field of assessment will find this book essential reading.

Heinemann, 800.225.5800, www.heinemann.com

Improving Classroom Assessment: A Toolkit for Professional Developers by Regional Educational Laboratories

A product of national research and development efforts, this toolkit is designed for those responsible for coordinating and facilitating professional development in assessment. It contains 35 activities organized in four sequentially developed modules with instructions for trainers, overhead masters, readings, 48 sample assessments, student work samples, and an assessment evaluation form for use in training. A hands-on document, it is filled with activities designed for workshop presentation.

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 503.273.9519, nwrel.org/eval/toolkit98/


This updated training package helps middle-school mathematics staff developers clarify the meaning of standards, evaluate assessments in terms of their alignment to standards, and plan student learning experiences that reflect standards-based teaching practices. Co-developed by WestEd and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), this second edition contains the current NCTM Principles and Standards for School Mathematics, Grades 6–8, updated resources and research on mathematics assessment, mathematics professional development, evaluation of professional development, and mathematics teaching and learning. It provides sample scripts for professional development sessions; blackline masters for handouts and transparencies; planning guides; assessment items from TIMSS and NAEP; and a related PBS Mathline® video.

WestEd, 888.293.7833, www.wested.org

Making Assessment Work for Everyone: How to Build on Student Strengths by Patricia Kasimo, Melissa G. Ritter, Kathleen Busick, Chris Ferguson, Elise Trumbull, Guillermo Solano-Flores

The book is intended to help readers:

- better understand the essential characteristics of good assessment;
- uncover and account for the strengths and cultural perspectives of diverse learners;
- create or select classroom assessments that support and reveal the learning of every child, while also meeting high standards;
- increase awareness of potential sources of bias and inequity in assessments; and
- use strategies to modify and improve inequitable assessments.

Making Assessment Work explains relevant research findings both about assessment and about cultural, linguistic, and other types of diversity. More importantly, it links these findings directly to classroom practice. To that end, it includes thought-provoking vignettes of how biased assessments can yield misleading data about student learning, “things to consider” in analyzing these vignettes, and “things to try,” which are short activities designed to help readers develop deeper understanding.

WestEd, 888.293.7833, www.wested.org

Using Assessments to Teach for Understanding: A Casebook for Educators edited by Judith H. Shulman, Andrea Whittaker, and Michele Lew

A collection of teacher-developed cases from WestEd’s Institute for Case Development provides educators with the opportunity to collaboratively analyze and reflect on issues of assessment. The 15 cases in this volume feature experiences from elementary, middle school, dual-language, and special education classrooms. Three cases explore using assessments to guide support for beginning teachers. The related Facilitator’s Guide helps the user of the cases think through the substantive and pedagogical issues associated with the use of cases generally and these cases in particular.

WestEd, 888.293.7833, www.wested.org
Assessment for Learning

The book Assessment for Learning grew out of lessons learned from an extensive review of research on formative assessment. Researchers Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam studied 681 articles or chapters looking for quantitative evidence of the impact of innovations in formative assessment on student learning. The review uncovered the positive effect of formative assessment on students’ achievement and led the researchers to conduct a two-year project aimed at putting formative assessment into practice. They worked with 48 teachers of English, mathematics, and science in six schools. Students in the project made significant improvements in achievement. Results from the project confirm prior research, and the project activities provide teachers, teacher trainers, school heads and others leaders with ideas and advice for improving formative assessment in the classroom.

The book provides a brief review of the research background and of the project itself. Successive chapters describe the specific practices which teachers found fruitful and the underlying ideas about learning that these developments illustrate. Later chapters discuss the problems that teachers encountered when implementing the new practices in their classroom and give school management guidance for promoting and supporting the changes. This book offers valuable insights into assessment for learning as teachers describe in their own words how they turned the ideas into practical action in their schools.

Assessment for Learning: Putting it into Practice
By Paul Black, Christine Harrison, Clare Lee, Bethan Marshall, and Dylan Wiliam.

Inside the Black Box
By Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam
Available at www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kbla9810.htm

Working Inside the Black Box
By Paul Black, Christine Harrison, Clare Lee, Bethan Marshall, and Dylan Wiliam
See www.pdkintl.org for more information on ordering archive articles from Phi Delta Kappan.