



Assessment to make ‘dramatic advance;’ coherency, comprehensiveness key

By: Lew Armistead

Assessment in America’s high schools is about to undergo its most dramatic advance in decades, according to a policy brief released in February by the Alliance for Excellent Education (AEE), a Washington, DC, based organization devoted to promoting high school transformation.

“There is widespread concern that the most prominent assessments currently being used in the United States are inadequate and may have a significantly negative impact on student learning,” wrote Robert Rothman, an AEE senior fellow, in the report, “Principles for a Comprehensive Assessment System.”

“These tests measure a limited range of knowledge and skills and thus provide an incomplete—and often inaccurate—picture of what students know and can do,” Rothman continued. “They also provide an inaccurate picture of school performance and make it difficult to direct resources to the schools that need them the most.”

The report’s author contends that the “dramatic advance” will be due to a state-led effort to create common core standards in literacy and mathematics along with the U.S. Department of Education’s collaboration with states to develop new assessments that measure these standards.

Rothman outlines principles that will lead to the most effective new assessments.

“Recognizing that no single test can fulfill all the needs for information by all stakeholders, it (the brief) suggests the need for a comprehensive system of assessments. Most importantly, the brief argues that this system needs to be coherent and cohesive, (and) aligned to standards for college and career readiness.

“Of course, an assessment system alone cannot ensure that all students learn what they need to know to succeed after graduating high school,” Rothman pointed out. “Teachers need curriculum and instructional tools to teach effectively, as well as the ability to use assessment information skillfully. Yet without strong assessments, any effort to raise standards for students

will likely fail. To ensure that students know what they need to know, we have to know what they know now.”

The brief calls for a new comprehensive-coherent assessment system in which curriculum, instruction and assessment are intertwined.

“Think of the system as a wheel—at the hub are the common core standards, and the spokes include summative assessments, formative assessments, curriculum tasks, instructional tools, and professional development.”

This system should be organized around four principles, according to the brief—

Coherence

The new approach should align curriculum, instruction and assessment around the key learning goals spelled out in standards for college and career readiness. Currently, many assessments are not aligned and test items tend to focus on low-level content and skills.

“ A coherent system would be organized around a limited number of ‘big ideas’ in the standards, rather than attempt to align all pieces to every standard,” the brief suggested. “The system would ensure that all components, at all levels, are truly aligned to those big ideas. This practice is common in other countries... (where) education officials use standards to develop curriculum guides, or syllabi, and professional development, along with external and classroom-based assessment.

(Examples from Australia and Canada are cited in the full brief, which can be assessed at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/ComprehensiveAssessmentSystem.pdf>.)

Comprehensiveness

A comprehensive system would include a variety of assessment that meet a number of different purposes and provide various users with the information they need to make decisions. The typical end-of-the-year tests may provide information for accountability purposes, but they do little for teachers who plan programs for students or school leaders.

“For example, such a system would include formative assessments that show teachers whether students truly understand the content or where they are struggling, along with tools to suggest steps they could take to help students overcome their difficulties,” the report indicated.

“The system would also include measures that provide data to inform school leaders about teacher effectiveness at improving student learning over the course of a year and that suggest professional development strategies. And it would include classroom assessments that provide students and parents with an ongoing record of student progress, along with indicators to show where improvement is needed.”

The system also would have to recognize the unique needs of high schools.

“In the upper grades, high school students often branch off into various pathways that reflect their interests. While such pathways should all lead to preparation for postsecondary successes, they require different assessments, and a comprehensive system would accommodate those differences.”

Accuracy and Credibility

“To serve as credible measures of standards for college and career readiness, assessment systems must not only indicate whether high school graduates are prepared for postsecondary success; they must also show whether younger students are on a path that will lead to future success. In order to accomplish this goal, the assessment system should be grounded in a clear, evidence-based idea of learning and development that leads to college and career readiness.”

Fairness

The new system must allow all students to show what they know and are able to do. While states have made strides in including students with disabilities and English language learners in assessments, more can be done. Assessment should be designed from the outset to allow participation by all students.

“This means, among other things, making sure that the language and images used are clear to all and are relevant to the concepts that are tested, enabling the use of responses other than writing, and providing accommodations that facilitate participation.”

Assessments also should allow students at all ranges on the achievement continuum to show what they know and can do, and they should be transparent so students know what the expectations are.

In addition to the organizing principles, Rothman recommends that four design concepts be included in new assessment systems—

Matching Learning Goals

Types of assessment tasks need to match the learning goals established for students. Some assessments could be multiple-choice items, but others likely will require extended tasks and performances. Some can be completed during the school year while others would occur at the end of the year.

Clarity in Reporting

The design of assessment reports should be determined at the start of the process and geared

to providing various audiences the data they need to promote student learning.

“Performance reports are in many ways the most important part of assessment systems—they are the ways that students, parents, teachers, and policymakers learn what students know and can do,” the brief explained. “Yet too often they are an afterthought, developed after the assessment is designed. As a result, they are often too arcane to serve a useful function, and in some cases they do not accurately convey student learning.”

Use of technology

As with other aspects of education, technology presents opportunities for improvement.

“Online testing...can provide much better information about student abilities. Computer-adaptive testing, in which the items students respond to depend on their performance, can provide more accurate estimates of student performance, because it can pinpoint a student’s level of achievement more efficiently.”

Computerized assessment can also save money and facilitates teacher involvement in assessment development and scoring.

Teacher engagement

When teachers are involved in all aspects of assessment, they are more likely to use the tool efficiently.

“One reason many teachers see testing as something apart from the daily work of teaching and learning is because in many cases they have had little to do with the development and scoring of assessments. They receive materials from a testing company, hand them out to students, collect them and send them back, and then get a report some months later that might seem incomprehensible to them.

“Involving teachers in the development and review of assessment tasks can help them see that the tasks students are expected to perform are worthy exercises. And they can connect these tasks to the learning goals students are expected to meet.”

The brief calls upon the federal government to take several steps to help ensure development of assessment systems that support student learning—

- Require that tests provide credible and valid information on student progress toward college and career readiness.
- Require that tests for accountability purposes measure the breadth of standards for college and career readiness, and authorize the inclusion of curriculum-based assessments that measure competencies that cannot be assessed effectively by end-of-year tests.
- Target professional development funds toward the improvement of teachers’ assessment knowledge and skills.

- Ensure that assessments fairly include virtually all students, including English language learners and students with disabilities, and that they provide accurate information about student knowledge and skills.
- Maintain the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) as an independent monitor of state and district performance.
- Provide states with financial support for assessment operating costs.
- Provide support for the development and implementation of formative assessments and instructional tools.
- Invest in research on learning progressions.
- Evaluate the implementation and impact of new assessment systems.

The complete brief and more information from the February webinar where it was released can be found on the AEE web site, <http://www.all4ed.org/events/WebinarAssessments022510>

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