

Linking Assessment and School Success

By Helen Raham

In recent years, school systems have experienced a dramatic shift toward the use of large-scale assessment to inform efforts to raise student achievement. Over the past two decades, 27 countries and provinces added a total of 53 standardized assessment instruments; only two have decreased testing.¹ Nine Canadian provinces and 48 American states administer standardized assessments of learning across the grades.

The rising culture of accountability means access to performance information is becoming increasingly open. Eight Canadian jurisdictions now make results available at the individual school level. The purposes and uses of such testing, however, continue to be widely debated.

Benefits of External Assessment

Musicians, athletes, manufacturers, and medical researchers all use rigorous performance analysis to improve quality. Similarly, external assessment may improve school performance by:

Stimulating Response

Placing student outcomes in a broader context encourages schools to examine their practices. Provincial governments may elicit action plans through annual report cards, school council accountability reports, growth plans, or three-year education plans focusing on school progress to encourage a culture of continuous improvement.

Targeting Resources

Assessment results can help direct education resources to support high needs programs or to bolster teaching and learning in a difficult environment.

Increasing School Autonomy

In recognition of their unique challenges, schools are increasingly being given greater authority to make site-based decisions, which can lead to demonstrated learning gains. Research suggests high performance schools require a high level of autonomy and flexibility.²

Improving Learning

Growing evidence allows us to make some assumptions about the relationship between assessment practices and student achievement gains. U.S. national testing data from 1990-98 reveals that states with assessments strongly linked to school accountability show the greatest increases in student learning.³ The focus on results also appears to be narrowing the achievement gap, with disadvantaged students making the strongest gains.⁴ In Canada, provinces with external curriculum-based graduation examinations produce stronger student achievement than those without.⁵ Quebec and Alberta, with the longest-standing practice of releasing school results, outperform other provinces on national and international tests.⁶

Promotes Equity


In a global information economy, all of our students must attain higher skill levels than ever to succeed. In an equitable society, we cannot accept lower expectations for some, based on geography or income. Tracking school results through external testing gives policymakers the means to intervene to improve outcomes.

Multiples Measures Needed

Our external assessments consist largely of achievement and participation rates, but there are many other dimensions of school success that we fail to capture in a systematic way: principal leadership, parent and student satisfaction levels, instructional expertise, parental and community involvement, and modes of learning. Education stakeholders need to jointly develop an extended range of universal indicators.

...continued page 43



teachers to be more accountable for the performance of their students, and for reformers to justify their claims of success with objective, credible data. The push for performance-driven reforms has unleashed local ingenuity, promising ideas, and innovation, accompanied by a growing belief that evidence-based policies and programs will be more effective than those based on hope or intuition. If these trends continue, the elusive “consumer guide” on “what works” may some day be within our reach. It will not happen overnight, however. An understanding of what works cannot be obtained from any one study, no matter how well designed. It is the accumulation of findings over time that will help us make informed choices. All the more reason to do more rigorous research sooner rather than later. 

Linking Assessment and School Success

...continued from page 23

Schools should also develop clear indicators for goals which may reflect their unique school mission. Whether improving citizenship skills, creative thinking, or community partnerships, these goals must be measurable so schools will know when they have been achieved. The education community has only recently begun to grapple with assessment tools in such domains.

By using a combination of internal and external evaluations, schools can gather ‘total performance feedback’ to guide their decisions.

Leveraging Results


Collecting statistics is only the first step. The challenge is to use this data to build success and increase the capacity of schools to respond to performance feedback — by developing assessment literacy to eliminate the fear of data, by helping the media and public understand the context of performance indicators, and by encouraging governments and school boards to provide expert assistance in interpreting results, and setting and achieving reasonable targets. As Michael Fullan suggests, schools can put themselves in the driver’s seat by investing in professional development and collaborative cultures that strengthen the focus on results.⁷

The goal of assessment is to move and improve every school. Researchers suggest that, in order to implement this complex process and create a dynamic cycle of continuous improvement schools must:

- Establish a baseline school profile including student performance data, demographics, school characteristics and stakeholder perspectives;
- Set priority learning targets and specific targets for improvement;
- Determine the barriers. Examine how instructional practices and school organization affect achievement. In this critical phase, educators move from reflecting on student work to reflecting on their *own* professional practices.

- Develop a research-grounded action plan for improvement and decide what measures will be used assess results.
- Implement the plan and document results. At this stage, leadership, teamwork, substantial support, energy and resources over time are what count.
- Repeat the cycle.⁸

Conclusion

School assessment is as complex as learning itself, and only as valuable as the uses to which it is put. It should be carefully balanced between internal and external processes. The best assessment systems will change the internal dynamics of our schools to improve teaching and learning. 

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