



Center for
K–12 Assessment
& Performance Management

An independent catalyst and resource for the improvement of measurement and data systems to enhance student achievement.

Exploratory Seminar:
Measurement Challenges Within
the Race to the Top Agenda
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ASSESSMENT AS A REFORM TOOL

This policy brief is based on a presentation by Lauren Resnick (University of Pittsburgh) at the Exploratory Seminar: Measurement Challenges Within the Race to the Top Agenda, December 2009. Download copies of the final papers written by seminar participants at <http://www.k12center.org/publications.html>.

The policy window that is open to many of the new approaches to assessment discussed in the presentations at the Exploratory Seminar will not remain open long. The small chance for change cannot wait on long-term research and needs to start immediately with a three-legged strategy that ties standards, curriculum, and assessment together.

We want assessments that not only measure productivity, but that also guide the activities that will move students, teachers, supervisors, and others in education into a more productive mode. While using economic terms to describe education goals may offend some, it is the economics of the issue that has opened the current window of opportunity to change assessment systems. The policy window will be open only a short time, and there is only a slight chance the redesigns of assessment systems discussed at this Exploratory Seminar will be able to pass through, but we need to try.

Turning first to the need for assessments that support instruction, what are their characteristics?

- They model desired performances, and they'd better do that because teaching to the test will occur whether we approve of it or not.
- They evaluate instructional successes/failures, either at the end of the course or at the end of units of instruction; the latter is preferable because it is a closer check on teaching and learning.
- They diagnose individual students' needs and are embedded inside the instructional units.

These approaches to using assessments to support instruction must happen at the classroom level. The top-down use of assessment for accountability, with its incentives and punishments, is also going to happen, so we need to figure out how to make it as positive as we can.

Created by Educational Testing Service (ETS) to forward a larger social mission, the Center for K–12 Assessment & Performance Management has been given the directive to serve as an independent catalyst and resource for the improvement of measurement and data systems to enhance student achievement.

The Improvement Tripod and Importance of Curriculum

Working with colleagues on a white paper project at the National Academy of Sciences, we developed a tripod for improving education—standards, curriculum, and instruction. If we only have standards and assessments, the use of standards could become very brittle. The way to avoid that is to make curriculum an equal part of the package. The traditional attitude is that curriculum is off the table because it is up to local decisionmaking. What is not said is that it is the vending capacities of different companies and even nonprofits that set the curriculum. It is time for the curriculum to return to a central role in policy, a move that makes political sense and can be started rather quickly. This would be better than waiting for a long period of research, while the practices we already know are damaging continue.

Our Mischievous Test-Based Accountability System

We have a test-based accountability system where standards are really unimportant because our alignment systems are so weak. In our system:

- Incentives and high-stakes assessment work but not always in ways that we want.
- Tests reveal poor performance, and because we have a fundamentally educated but undersupported workforce, teachers do the best they can to eliminate the poor test performance in the fastest, simplest way they know.
- Teachers teach to the test, which is supported by the vendors and superintendents even though the superintendents know it is not right.

Where to Intervene

The use of interim or benchmark tests evoke even more teaching to the tests and make the problem even worse. This is the place to get control. We must stop using measurement as the foundation or basis of instructional improvement and focus first on what to teach. Paying attention to the curriculum is not a blow to creativity or individuality, but a recognition that if we want to move a whole system, we must go to its heart, which is the curriculum, or a sequence of linked teacher materials. For serious change, we cannot count on individual teachers or schools to construct the plan from scratch.

Changing the Policy Agenda

We need to immediately slow down the policy move toward even greater dependence on summative assessments as the next step in reform. Instead, we should:

- Build the curriculum and structural models with a sequence of linked teaching materials.
- Replace the current interim or benchmark tests with end-of-unit instruction built from the core units. For example, a 2-6-week unit would end with a test. In a year's time, the process might produce 10 assessments, in different subject matters and grade levels. These become the real heart of instruction.

- Explore the possibility of building accountability on a collection of the unit data, as some of the presentations in the Exploratory Seminar have proposed.

The Role of Learning Progressions

The new Common Core Standards will consist of a hypothetical set of thick grain learning progressions, a few per year per subject. They are not so much data-supported as they are experience-supported. Though they are not as pure as advocates want, it would be possible to develop three to four a year with instructional sequences and with end-of-unit assessments attached. A small set of different groups could develop them and get them into the marketplace. The key is to have research that defines the sequences over time. There is some risk in this approach, but much less risk than with a new round of summative assessments.

Before the Window Closes

In the past, the measurement community would have insisted that we do research in advance of implementation. We have told policymakers that we know a lot and can help redesign assessment systems by building research into and alongside implementation. The truth is that federal policymakers developing the RTT assessment specs do not care what kind of test states use to evaluate teacher quality nor are they concerned about the testing problems that we understand. Their attitude is: We need to do something. Give us the best you've got.

For More Information

For more information on this subject, please see the papers presented at the the Exploratory Seminar: Measurement Challenges Within the Race to the Top Agenda, December 2009:

<http://www.k12center.org/publications.html>.