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# Effective **Instructional Leadership** Requires **Assessment Leadership**



Principals must support their teachers' use of assessments to improve learning. But if principals are not trained to use assessments for learning, how can they help?

**By Rick Stiggins and Dan Duke**

**T**here is universal agreement that principals can play a pivotal role in the improvement of student learning. Consequently, there is widespread agreement that principals should function as instructional leaders. Principal preparation programs offer courses on instructional leadership, and education scholars have written volumes on the subject. These courses and

books emphasize knowledge and skills related to curriculum alignment, teaching methods, classroom observation, and evaluation and supervision of teaching. While all of these dimensions of instructional leader-

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ship are crucial, they do not encompass the entire domain. Instructional leadership also requires an understanding of the role of sound assessment in efforts to improve teaching and learning. The well-prepared principal is ready to ensure that assessments are of high quality and used effectively. Yet, historically, preparation for productive assessment has been missing from principal training programs.

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Principals can be pivotal in the improvement of student learning by helping teachers develop and use sound classroom assessments that strengthen instruction and student learning. The typical teacher will spend a quarter to a third of her or his available professional time involved in assessment-related activities. If they do it well, both teachers and students gain access to evidence that can be used in making sound instructional decisions. If they do it poorly, learning will suffer. In spite of this, little of principals' preparation time is spent learning about assessments.

In this era of accountability, classroom assessments are the foundation of a truly effective assessment system. If classroom assessments aren't working effectively day to day in the classroom, then accountability tests and benchmark assessments cannot pick up the slack. In other words, if teachers and students make bad decisions day in and day out during the learning, then no interim or annual test yet invented can overcome the dire consequences for the learner. Yet, classroom assessments have been almost completely ignored over the decades of school improvement.<sup>1</sup>

The principal must be a key player in ensuring the accuracy and effective use of evidence of student achievement at the school and classroom level. Therefore, preparation for this significant role must be part of preservice principal preparation programs.

## THE PRINCIPAL'S ROLE

Assessment is, in part, the process of gathering information to inform instructional decisions. Truly productive, balanced assessment systems within classrooms, schools, and districts serve the information needs of a wide variety of important assessment users.

In other words, school leaders must ensure that their assessment systems provide a wide variety of decision makers with a variety of different kinds of information in different forms at different times to support or to verify student learning, depending on the context.

For this reason, the starting place for the creation of an assessment in any particular context must be a clear understanding of the information needs of the intended users.<sup>2</sup> *Classroom-level* assessments help students, teachers, and sometimes parents make their instructional decisions. Here, assessments can serve to support and verify learning. *Program-level* assessments enable teacher leaders and teams, as well as principals, curriculum personnel, and others, to evaluate program effectiveness across classrooms and plan for their improvement. And finally, *institutional accountability and policy-level* assessments enable school, district, and community leaders to make decisions about resource allocation.

To devise a truly useful assessment in any of these contexts, one must begin assessment design and development with clear answers to the following questions:

- What instructional decisions are to be made based on assessment results?
- Who will be making those decisions?
- What information will help them make good decisions?

The answers to these questions vary across the three levels.

**Classroom Assessment.** At the classroom level, the context is one in which achievement standards have been arrayed in learning progressions that unfold within and across grade levels over time to map the learner's route to ultimate academic success. Assessment fits in as follows:

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|------------------------|--|
| • Decision to be made? | What comes next in the learning  |
| • Made by whom?        | Students and teachers  |
| • Information needed?  | Continuous evidence of each student's current location on the scaffolding leading to each standard |

In order to know what comes next in the learning, teachers must know where a student is now on the learning progression. Classroom assessments must provide that information, not once a year or every few

weeks, but continuously as students ascend the scaffolding toward the standard. Note that the focus of attention is on the achievement of each individual student — there is no aggregation of data across students. And note that the question is not whether students are mastering standards. Rather, it is how *each* student is doing on his or her journey to each standard.

Assessment systems must provide a variety of decision makers with a variety of different kinds of information in different forms at different times to support or to verify student learning.

Principals must ensure that teachers are prepared to gather and productively use evidence of student learning in their classrooms. If they are not, then the school leader must either change the selection criteria for the hiring of teachers or secure appropriate professional development for those teachers in need. In either case, proper supervision is essential. This requires principals who are assessment literate.

**Program Evaluation.** The answers to the same three orienting questions are different at the *program level* of instructional improvement:

- Decision to be made? Which standards are students *not* mastering
- Made by whom? Teacher teams, teacher leaders, principals, and curriculum personnel
- Information needed? Periodic, but frequent, evidence aggregated across classrooms revealing standards not mastered

Program evaluation relies on interim, benchmark, or short-cycle assessments given every few weeks in order to identify where instructional programs can be improved. Such formative assessment can tell faculties precisely where to focus their improvement efforts and how to make those improvements in a timely manner. The focus of attention in this case is the achievement standard. Users seek to identify those standards with which students struggle so as to bring program resources to bear more effectively on their behalf.

Once again, the principal must know how to en-

## 10 LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES IN ASSESSMENT

A well-qualified principal has 10 specific competencies in assessment.

- Understands the principles of assessments for (that is, used in support of) learning and works with staff to integrate them into classroom instruction.
- Understands the necessity of clear academic achievement targets and their relationship to the development of accurate assessments.
- Knows and can evaluate the teacher's classroom assessment competencies and helps teachers learn to assess accurately and use the results productively.
- Can plan, present, or secure professional development activities that contribute to the use of sound assessment practices.
- Accurately analyzes student assessment information, uses the information to improve curriculum and instruction, and assists teachers in doing the same.
- Can develop and implement sound assessment and assessment-related policies.
- Creates the conditions necessary for the appropriate use and reporting of student achievement information, and can communicate effectively with all members of the school community about student assessment results and their relationship to improving curriculum and instruction.
- Understands the standards of quality for student assessments and how to verify their use in their school/district assessments.
- Understands the attributes of a sound and balanced assessment system.
- Understands the issues related to the unethical and inappropriate use of student assessment and protects students and staff from such misuse.

**Source:** Stephen Chappuis, Rick Stiggins, Judith A. Arter, and Jan Chappuis, *Assessment FOR Learning: An Action Guide for School Leaders* (Portland, Ore.: ETS Assessment Training Institute, 2005), p. 99.

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sure the quality of these assessments and that they are being used productively by program planners and developers. This also requires a foundation of assessment literacy.

**Institutional Level of Accountability Assessment.** Finally, at the institutional accountability or policy level, the accountability question comes to the fore:

- Decision to be made? Are enough students meeting required standards
- Made by whom? Superintendents, school boards, legislators
- Information needed? Annual summaries of standards mastered on accountability tests

In this case, assessments serve summative purposes. It is a matter of law that schools must administer annual assessments to all students in certain grade levels to reveal the proportion of students mastering standards.

The principal must both understand and be able to communicate with staff and the school community about these assessment results. The school leader must understand how to link those results to productive instructional improvement. As above, fulfilling this responsibility requires assessment literacy.

**Note the Differences.** Principals must understand

the fundamental differences in the information needs of assessment users. Every assessment poses different questions because the individuals who use the resulting information have different needs. The classroom level asks, How goes the journey to competence? The program level asks, How might programs be improved? And the institutional level asks, Are schools as effective as they need to be? No single assessment can answer all of these questions. A productive, multilevel assessment system is needed to ensure that decision makers have sufficient and appropriate information. Clearly, any assessment system that fails to meet the information needs of any decision maker at any level places students directly in harm's way. The school leader must ensure that this does not happen.

## **CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT IS KEY**

While balance is important, the classroom assessment is the foundation of a truly effective system. Yet, the classroom level of assessment has been almost completely ignored over decades of school improvement.<sup>3</sup>

When used effectively as a teaching tool — that is, to support learning — classroom assessment has proven its ability to greatly enhance (not merely monitor) student learning. In their syntheses of dozens of studies conducted around the world, Black and William and Hattie and Timperley report effect sizes of a half to a full standard deviation gain in student test performance attributable to the effective management of classroom assessment, with the largest gains accruing for low achievers. Keys to productive practice, they report, are increasing classroom assessment accuracy, increasing reliance on descriptive (versus judgmental) feedback to students, and deep student involvement in the self-assessment process.<sup>4</sup>

Principals themselves are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of effective assessment. For example, principals engaged in turning around low-performing elementary and middle schools as part of the University of Virginia's School Turn-Around Specialist Program were asked to identify the conditions that contributed to low student performance.<sup>5</sup> Two-thirds believed that a lack of time for focused assessment played a role. Without such data, teachers were less likely to target instructional interventions and provide effective assistance to struggling students. Many teachers in those same schools recognized the absence of high-quality assessment results. A survey of 320 teachers in 15 low-performing schools involved in the University of Virginia program found

that many teachers believed that they needed to learn more about how to use classroom assessment results to support student learning.<sup>6</sup>

By promoting the benefits of frequent formative assessment and enabling teachers to draw on assessment data to target their assistance, these principals played a key role in improving teaching and learning.<sup>7</sup> The principal's role was not to be the assessment expert or to provide the needed professional development. Rather, the principal was responsible for seeing that professional development opportunities were made available.

Obviously, this work can be done productively only by principals who, themselves, have developed a foundation of assessment literacy. Yet, this has been chronically missing from training.

## **BARRIERS TO ASSESSMENT LEADERSHIP**

To clear the path to improved leader competence in assessment, let's analyze the barriers that have prevented prospective principals from having the opportunity to learn in the past. These represent our speculations based on well over 60 years of combined experience in assessment and school leadership. However, we have not systematically researched these potential reasons.

Leadership program designers may have assumed, for example, that candidates must have been trained in effective assessment practices during their preparation to become teachers. Surely, the program designers might contend, these teachers will have refined those skills during their years in the classroom. If this was the case, then further development of assessment competencies would be unnecessary. But, of course, we know that this beginning assumption is invalid. Many candidates may still need the opportunity to learn to assess accurately and use the assessment process productively.

A variation on the same theme is that the faculty of graduate leadership programs were teachers and local school administrators, none of whom had the opportunity to be-

come assessment literate during their professional training. This could mean that they lack insight about its importance or the expertise to offer assessment training. And it goes without saying that they would be unable to model these skills for their students. So faculty development may be needed.

The classroom assessment is the foundation of a truly effective system in this era of accountability.

Or the barrier might just be tradition. In any particular university program, principal preparation priorities may reflect the belief that administrators' job descriptions don't include assessment work. In fact, the conventional wisdom in schools has been that "assessment people," not principals, do the assessment work. So assessment training should remain in the background of principal preparation. Other content deserves greater emphasis, they would assert. This belief, too, is unfounded. Assessment people typically manage annual assessments and perhaps program-level

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Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM) congratulates Helen F. (Sunny) Ladd (Sanford Institute, Duke University) as the second biennial recipient of the Spencer Foundation Lecture in Education Policy and Management. On Thursday, November 8, 2007, Ladd delivered the lecture, "Holding Schools Accountable Revisited," at the 29<sup>th</sup> Annual APPAM Fall Research Conference in Washington, DC.

The complete text of Ladd's lecture is now available on this website:

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el assessments. But the classroom level falls to teachers under the direct supervision of their principal. This means principals must be sufficiently assessment literate to fulfill these growing responsibilities. If they are not, it is a barrier to sound practice.

## Principals must be sufficiently assessment literate to fulfill these growing responsibilities.

Furthermore, if those who formulate state licensing requirements share the belief that the principal's role does not include assessment, the consequences would be clear: not part of the job, not part of state requirements; not part of the requirements, not part of our leadership preparation program. But, again, we know that it is part of the job and, therefore, must be woven into the certification requirements and program outcomes.

Still further, let's say preservice preparation includes a field experience — an internship with an experienced principal. What if that supervising principal lacks an understanding of sound assessment practices? The learning implications for the neophyte principal are obvious.

From a more personal professional perspective, when a teacher in any context lacks clarity about what is to be taught and learned or when a teacher lacks confidence in his or her ability to deliver those outcomes, the result can be an unspoken fear of assessment and accountability. In such a case, if the teacher were to be clear and public about achievement targets from the outset, transform those targets into classroom assessments, and make the results public for all to see — that is, in effect, let the evidence of instructional effectiveness speak for itself — there is a danger that the assessment results would send a message that the teacher would rather not make public. This vulnerability can make teachers very nervous.

Barriers are numerous, including assumptions about prior training and experience, assumptions about the principal's role, or the risk of accountability. How can we remove these?

The answer is to promote an understanding of sound assessment practice among school leaders. With that background, principals will be equipped to ask questions and observe the practices of teachers and administrators around them in order to evaluate the quality of the assessment work. In other words, those who know what questions to ask and how to evaluate the answers they receive and those who know

what criteria to apply in evaluating the quality of any assessment will be in an excellent position to detect problems in professional development contexts or in actual classroom practice.

The stronger the assessment literacy background for new and practicing school leaders, the more able they will be to develop or arrange for the professional development their colleagues need to find remedies to their problems.

## REMOVING THE BARRIERS

We have made the case that instruction in developing balanced assessment systems and sound classroom assessment practice needs to be part of the principal preparation curriculum. But where is this content to be inserted? In already required courses in testing and measurement? In teacher supervision and evaluation? In field-based internships? Or is a new course needed to address this set of assessment issues?

Determining how best to provide assessment literacy depends, to some extent, on available personnel and the current curriculum. Creating a separate course may be unrealistic in some programs, given that they must meet state requirements that might not include this topic. These requirements leave some programs fully structured with no room for electives. Under these circumstances, it may be best to expand the objectives of existing courses, such as teacher supervision and evaluation, to include classroom assessment. To do so, however, would require training in classroom assessment for faculty teaching such a course.

If the local teacher education program includes a high-quality course in classroom assessment, it may make sense for programs to advise principal candidates to enroll. There are very real advantages to having prospective principals and prospective teachers learning about sound assessment practice together. It also may be tempting to encourage candidates to enroll in a traditional tests-and-measurement course in an educational psychology program. Here, we urge caution. Such courses often center on psychometric content and do not address the unique and challenging demands of balanced assessment or day-to-day classroom assessment.

Expecting students to learn about assessment practice during internships can be risky, since it cannot be assumed that field-based supervisors are prepared to provide instruction in this area. Until more school leaders develop appropriate levels of assessment literacy, internships will not provide a solution.

Some leader preparation programs are introducing new courses and modules within courses aligned with the increased accountability demands of No Child

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Left Behind and various state accountability requirements. This new generation of training typically covers such assessment-related topics as data-driven decision making for instructional improvement. Obviously, such offerings afford excellent opportunities for addressing classroom assessment.

While course content on sound assessment practice certainly would be very helpful, there is no substitute for teaching sound practices by modeling them in graduate courses in educational leadership. There is no reason why, with the proper training, faculty cannot demonstrate good assessment in all of their course assessments. To do so, of course, would require a com-

mitment by each faculty member to learn about and implement sound assessment practices. It is hard to imagine an argument for not doing so.

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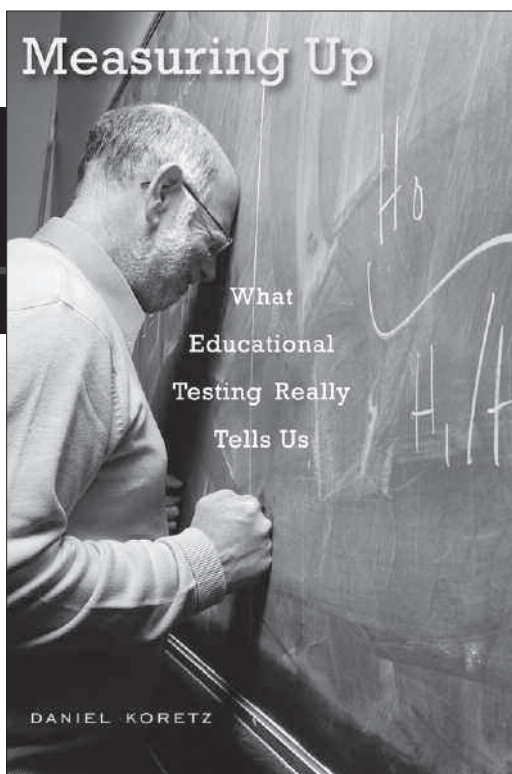
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4. Black and Wiliam, op. cit.; and John Hattie and Helen Timperley, "The Power of Feedback," *Review of Educational Research*, Spring 2007, pp. 81-112.

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6. Daniel L. Duke, Tim Kanold, and Michael J. Salmonowicz, "Teachers' Perceptions of What Needs to Be Changed in Low-Performing Schools," University of Virginia.

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