

A Balanced and Coherent System of Assessment

“As we look to the future, we must balance annual, interim or benchmark, and classroom assessment. Only then will we meet the critically important information needs of all instructional decision makers.”

-Rick Stiggins, 2007

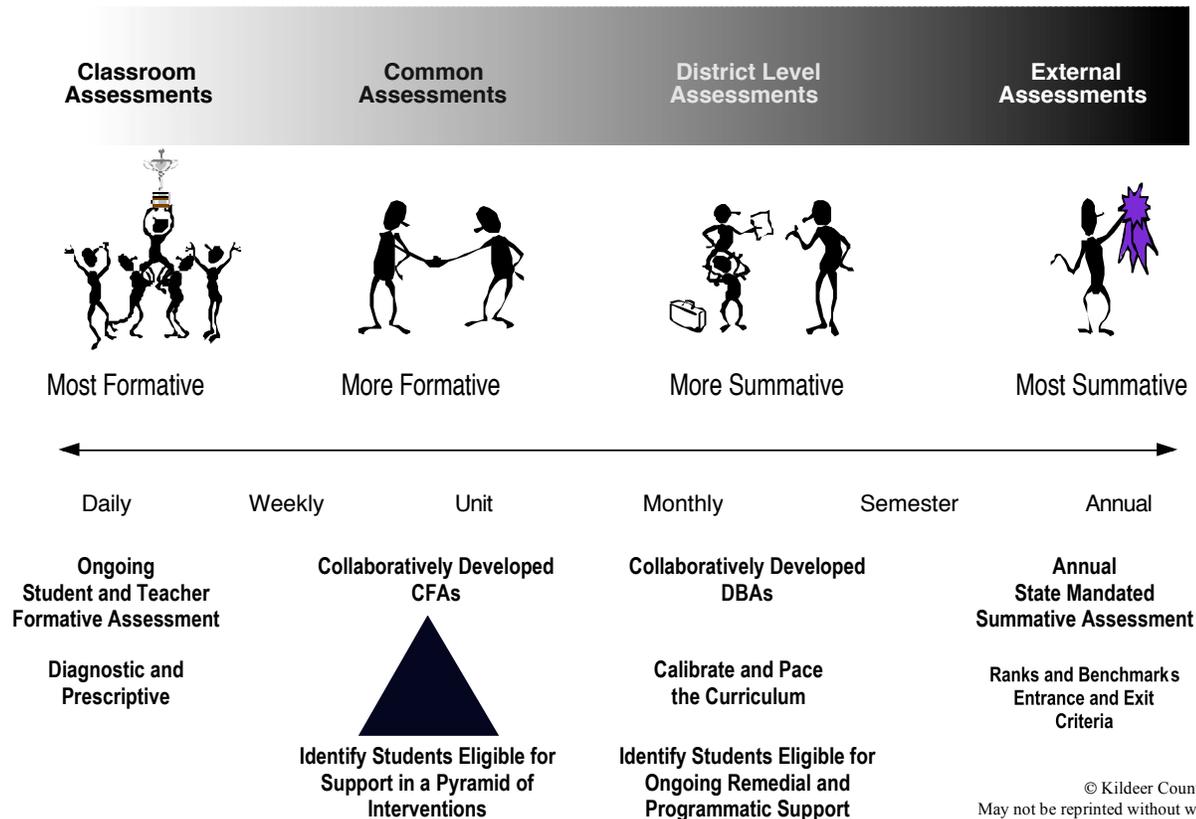
Principals consider two priorities when aligning assessment practices in their school. The first is to ensure that whatever assessment system a school embraces reflects a balance of both formative and summative assessments. A second and equally important priority is to ensure that those using the system understand the purpose of each assessment. Both of these priorities are essential to the creation of a balanced and coherent system of assessment.

In District 96, we have embraced a balanced and coherent system of assessment using a variety of assessments arranged along a continuum from most formative to most summative. The four categories of assessment: classroom assessments (most formative), common assessments (more formative), district benchmark assessments (more summative) and external assessments (most summative), are all valuable but each serves a distinctly different purpose (see graphic below).

The first category of a balanced and coherent system of assessment is labeled “most formative.” Ongoing, daily, sometimes in the moment, these classroom level assessments align directly with what teachers teach. Sam Redding describes this first category of “most formative” classroom assessments as “quick diagnostic tests used to prescribe appropriate learning activities for a student or group of students.” He elaborates, “These tests may be pencil-and-paper tests, oral quizzes, or ‘show-me’ assessments that a teacher can quickly and conveniently administer to determine each student’s level of mastery of the lesson’s objectives.”

At the opposite end of the continuum from the “most formative” assessments are those described as “most summative.” The best example of an assessment in the “most summative” category is the once-a-year, high-stakes state examinations so prevalent in US public schools. Interestingly, James Pophalm observes that,

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while these annual assessments “play an important role in monitoring student progress and providing system-level information for policymakers, there is no evidence at this time that such assessments increase student achievement.”

Within the category of “most summative” assessment, Redding includes “state assessments and norm-referenced achievement tests that provide an annual assessment of each student’s and the school’s progress by subject area and grade level.” These assessments help individual schools or districts target areas in which groups of students may be underperforming; however, these “most summative” assessments do not provide information that is timely enough to assist teachers in making instructional decisions that help individual students learn. Teachers know that receiving feedback on student progress only once a year—no matter how valid or reliable—simply is not often enough.

Assessments from the “most formative” and “most summative” categories are common in most schools but it is the interim assessments included within the middle two categories of “more formative” and “more summative” that offer teachers and principals the biggest opportunity to impact student learning.

Redding maintains that assessments from the “more summative” category should be administered to each class, course or grade level two to four times a year. These periodic, benchmark assessments “enable teacher teams to see how students are progressing towards mastery of standards that will be included on state assessments.” Most importantly, “the periodic assessments help bring a closer alignment between instruction and annual standards-based assessments.” Monitoring student performance on a periodic basis with these “more summative” assessments allows teachers to predict which students will be successful through the core curriculum and which will require additional time and support. On a very practical level, assessments from the “more summative” category help calibrate the curriculum and pace of instruction.

While practitioners find periodic data generated by the “more summative” benchmark assessments more useful than the once-a-year autopsy data generated by the “most summative” assessments, the “more summative” assessments still are not timely enough to guide a team’s day-to-day instructional decision making. Teachers need more frequent and formative assessments at the building level to effectively monitor student learning.

Principals address this need by encouraging the use of “more formative” common assessments embedded in the teaching and learning process. The primary purpose of these common assessments is to provide teach-

ers with frequent information about student learning. Redding describes these “more formative” assessments as “learning activities aligned to objectives with criteria for mastery which enable a teacher to check mastery within the context of instruction.” Redding continued, “by completing these assigned activities, students demonstrate a level of mastery of the objectives the activities are designed to teach or to reinforce.”

Designed by teams of teachers at the building level, these “more formative” common assessments provide the greatest leverage to teacher teams because they are so closely linked to what is being taught in the classroom and generate results that are timely enough to allow for adjustments in the sequence of instruction. As Carol Ann Tomlinson reports, “Assessments that came at the end of a unit—although important manifestations of student knowledge, understanding, and skill—were less useful to me as a teacher than were assessments that occurred *during* a unit of study.”

What is clear is that if teachers and principals are to be successful, they need information about student learning from a variety of sources. DuFour and Eaker caution that, “Relying on any one model of assessment would be a seriously flawed assessment strategy.” Savvy principals understand that assessment systems must be balanced and include both summative and formative assessment.

Principals also understand the importance of working with teachers to bring coherence to the assessment system in their school. Formative and summative assessments are not, in and of themselves, inherently better or worse than the other. What is important is that teachers understand the purpose of each assessment they use in their classroom. As Tomlinson observed, “The greatest power of assessment information lies in its capacity to help me [the teacher] see how to become a better teacher.” ■

During the course of a career spanning more than 30 years, Dr. Tom W. Many has served as a classroom teacher, principal and superintendent—all at the elementary level.

Read more from Dr. Many at <http://www.tepsa.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=235>. **Share** your experiences and/or questions by emailing feedback@tepsa.org.

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