

# SPOTLIGHT



—Stephanie Klein-Davis for Education Week

On exhibition night, Hidden Valley High seniors Matthew Whitely, left, and Bubba Smith set up the Rube Goldberg machine they helped build. It successfully hung a banner at the event.

## FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

### EDITOR'S NOTE

The need to drive better-quality instruction is keeping assessment in a state of motion. In this Spotlight, learn how digital formative assessments are tracking and monitoring student progress, how students are designing ways to demonstrate what they've learned, and how educators can provide authentic feedback in the classroom.

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# Assessment: A Snapshot of A Field In Motion

Much rides on student testing, and that's what keeps the field in a constant state of flux

By Debra Viadero

**S**tudents spend an average of 10 days out of the school year taking district-mandated tests and nine days taking state-required tests, according to the Center on Education Policy. Over 12 years of schooling, that adds up to nearly four months of a young person's life.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

That number does not include teacher-made tests, quizzes, final exams, many college-admissions tests and pre-tests; nor does it account for the amount of time teachers spend preparing students to take all those exams.

But the estimate, drawn from a nationwide 2015 survey of more than 3,000 teachers, provides a starting point for wrapping one's mind around the amount of testing students actually do in schools. It also points to the high priority that educators and policymakers put on tests and

the information they yield. While most of the teachers who responded to the center survey thought states and districts should cut back on the time students spend taking mandated tests, only a fraction of them wanted to dump those tests altogether.

Such tensions help keep the national testing landscape in a constant state of flux. In the search for better assessments, more authentic tests, or assessments that can drive better-quality instruction, new forms of testing come and go.

Much of that change in recent years has been driven by efforts to implement tests to measure students' progress in mastering the Common Core State Standards in math and English/language arts. Between 2010 and 2011, 45 states had adopted the standards. Within a few years, states' unity began to crumble. By the 2014-15 school year, as the tests were put in place, 27 states were using stan-

dards-aligned assessments developed by either Smarter Balanced or the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career consortia. The number dwindled to 20 this school year.

Ironically, as states backed off those assessment commitments, the prospect of annual testing ramped up for one subgroup of students: English-language learners.

The Every Student Succeeds Act, passed in 2015, requires states to test students in English-proficiency each year and to standardize criteria for determining when students no longer need language-support services.

The new federal education law injects some flexibility—and tumult—into the testing world by inviting states to use college-admissions tests like the ACT or SAT for federal accountability purposes. Twelve states are already doing that, and 13 more are requiring all high school students to take one of the two tests.

The scrambling going on around the college admissions tests obscures a milestone in that sector that passed in 2013 with little fanfare: For the first time that year, more students took the ACT than they did the SAT.

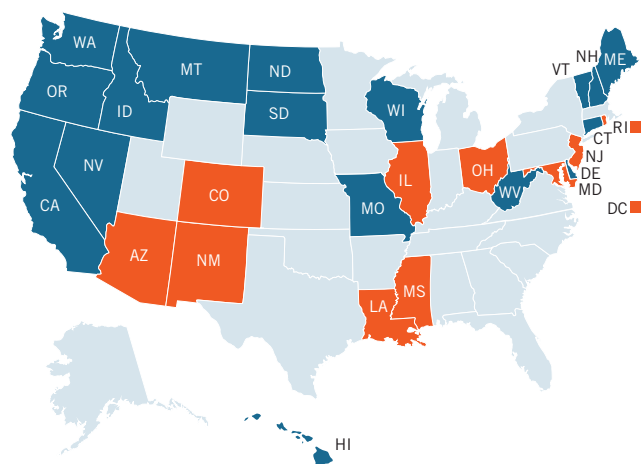
The inclusion of required college-admissions testing in states' accountability indicators is part of a push to ensure that all students graduate, as the expression goes, “college- and career-ready.” But how should schools measure student's progress on the career part? That's a difficult question, and experts are skeptical about the prospects for

## States' Testing, PARCC vs. Smarter Balanced

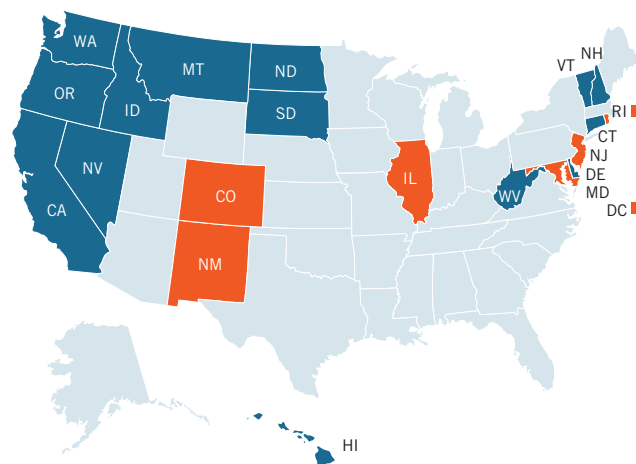
An *Education Week* survey taken earlier this year found at least seven states that backed off tests built by the PARCC and Smarter Balanced consortia.

■ Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium  
■ Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers

2014–15



2016–17





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assessments that reliably predict whether a student has the necessary skills to succeed in the workforce.

Elsewhere on the curriculum standards front, assessments aligned with new science standards are gaining traction, albeit slowly. Tests aligned with the new Next Generation Science Standards should require students to “show us how they know, not just what they know,” as one testing expert put it, and that entails a range of logistical, technical, and financial challenges for states.

Meanwhile, in the classroom, formative assessments are going digital in a big way. Formative assessments are meant to provide a way for teachers to quickly diagnose whether students are “getting it” so they can tailor their instruction accordingly. Teachers can do that by asking students to answer questions or take a paper-and-pencil quiz or they can turn to the growing number of digital products on the market that allow them to gather, track, and analyze their students’ progress. That sector of the market is currently booming, with experts predicting growth rates of 30 percent between 2013 and 2020.

A big downside to tests, especially summative tests where the stakes are high, is the anxiety they can create in students. “People who are anxious in general often get test anxiety, yes, but a lot of people who are not particularly anxious can still develop stress around tests in different subjects” like mathematics, said Mark Greenberg, a Pennsylvania State University researcher.

He is among a growing number of educators and researchers looking for ways to help students better cope with test-related stresses. Perhaps the most interesting example of these efforts is in Austin, Texas, where a full-time “mindfulness director” employed by the district trains teachers in anti-stress techniques they can pass on to students.

In the end, it all comes down to the students. What would assessments look like if they were designed by students themselves? Would students become more engaged in their learning? A network of public schools in Virginia is at work answering those questions right now. While results from their experiments are not in yet, teachers do say that students seem to be more involved in the learning. Stay tuned. ■

*Published May 24, 2017, in Education Week's Special Report: Student Testing: What's Next*

# Formative Assessments Go Digital

## Schools are expected to spend nearly \$1.6 billion this year on classroom assessment tools

By Michele Molnar

**A**s more students have access to computers in K-12 classrooms each year, teachers are turning more often to those devices for the age-old practice of conducting formative assessment.

A 2016 Education Week Research Center survey found that 83 percent of district or school leaders said their teachers were using one or more digital tools for conducting formative assessments during the 2015-16 school year. Of that group, 32 percent reported general success with the tools, and 45 percent said they had mixed results.

That could be because formative assessment—in which teachers use small checks of students’ understanding of material, then adjust their pedagogy accordingly and evaluate again—does not require digital tools in the first place.

But the appeal of using technology to monitor and track students’ progress—and give them an opportunity to answer newer item types like those they see on the computer-based, summative tests aligned to the Common Core State Standards—is gaining traction. And more digital tools in the hands of teachers for formative assessment translate into more investment on the part of schools.

In fact, classroom assessments, including formative and other kinds that are not state-mandated, represent nearly a \$1.6 billion market this year, compared with the almost \$1.3 billion that will be spent for state-mandated tests. Expected to grow by 30 percent through 2020, the classroom-based sector is the fastest-growing of the two. That number includes the cost of the professional development provided during the implementation stage, according to an analysis by Emerging Strategy, a market-intelligence firm.

The biggest change driving these numbers is the fact that digital purchases in the classroom-assessment market are often displacing print, said Robert Lytle, a managing director and a co-leader of the education practice at Parthenon-EY, Ernst & Young LLP, a business that provides consulting services to K-12 schools and the companies that sell to them. “A lot of classroom assessments are easier to do if they’re taken in digital format,” he said. Beyond that, educators can have the “data crunching” done for them by the technology.

“This is the heart of teaching and learning,” observed Lytle, so districts tend to be “pretty sophisticated buyers” of assessment software and “very sophisticated” in their understanding of how to drive implementation to make sure it actually works.

### Big State Investments

In North Carolina, for instance, 477,000 elementary children now have access to a formative-diagnostic-assessment system from Amplify to support the state’s commitment to ensure that all students will read by the 3rd grade. It’s a software program that has been increasing its reach since 2010, as the state has rolled it out.

“The great thing about it is that you can look at those K-3 scores and see that they align well with how the students do on the [state] end-of-grade exams at the end of 3rd grade,” said Carolyn Guthrie, North Carolina’s director of K-3 literacy.

The state chose Amplify so it can administer DIBELS, or Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, a rudimentary assessment for early reading intervention, and TRC, or Text Reading and Comprehension, which measures how the students apply foundational skills as they are reading authentic text. During this time, the teacher listens, using an iPad to

record what the child is doing. That data generates immediate reports for teachers.

In the Orange County, Fla., public schools, an assessment platform built by Performance Matters gives teachers—alone or in professional learning groups—the option of creating formative-assessment items and tracking student outcomes. If they don't want to write their own questions, they can draw from an item bank purchased from Progress Testing or other vendors.

"We like using the banks as exemplars," said Brandon McKelvey, the associate superintendent of research, accountability, and grants. Once they are trained in how to use the platform, teachers might save 20 percent to 25 percent of their lesson-planning time each week, he estimated.

### Boston's Adoption

The Boston district recently selected two companies to provide a formative-assessment platform and an item bank, after 12 responded to a request for proposals. The district chose Measured Progress for its item bank to generate interim assessments and, as needed, formative assessments, and Illuminate Education for the platform, which is an online tool where formative assessments can be built and administered and data can be captured and analyzed from multiple sources.

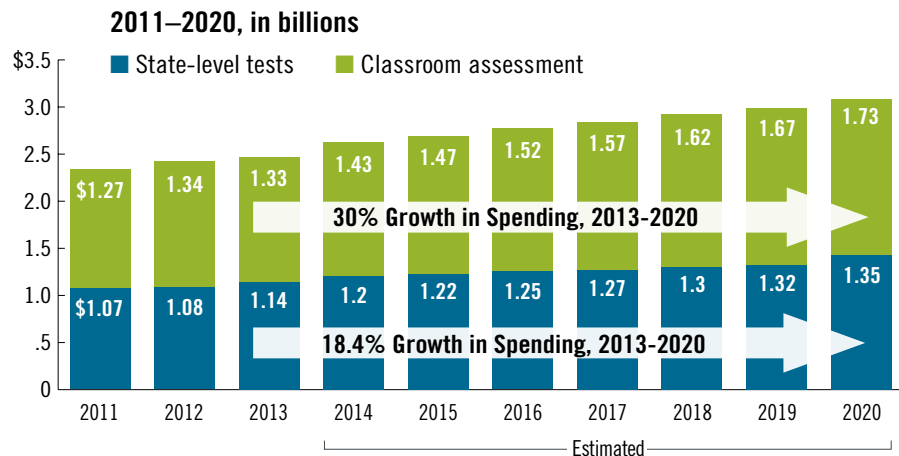
After a series of district- and school-based professional development sessions, the formative-assessment program is getting strong adoption with the teachers, said Michael Rubino, the formative-assessment manager in Boston.

"Assessment is a small piece of what the platform can do," he said, "In between benchmarks, teachers and school leaders are using the platform to monitor progress data, including reading levels and unit-level assessments." Both quantitative and qualitative formative assessments can be tracked on the platform, including daily exit tickets, informal conversations teachers have with students, and qualitative notes. By using built-in web-scanning software, the system can also pull data from paper-and-pencil tests and capture students' written work.

The idea of formative assessment has been around for more than 40 years, said Kathy Dyer, a senior professional-development specialist for the Northwest Evaluation Association. "But it does feel like the acceptance and

## K-12 Assessment Market Growth

Emerging Strategy, a market-intelligence company, analyzed this market in March 2016. "Classroom assessment" encompasses formative and other types of assessment that are not state-mandated.

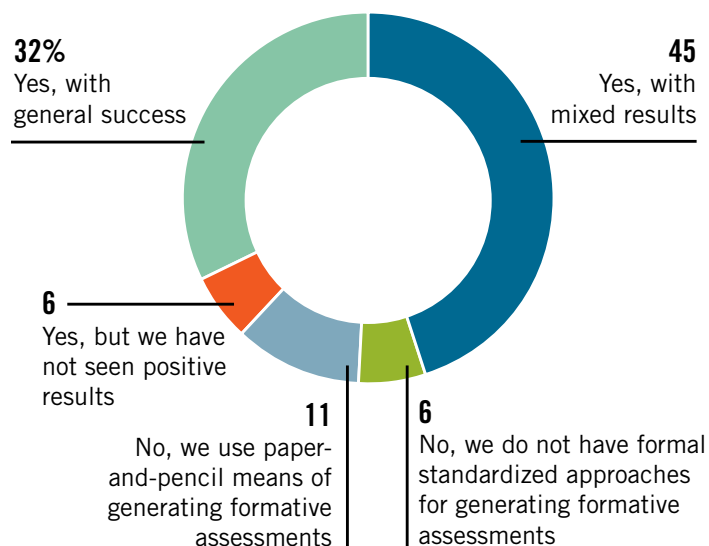


SOURCES: Simba Information (2014), BMO Capital Markets, Emerging Strategy analysis

## Are Digital Tools Being Used For Formative Assessment In Your School?

Based on responses from 455 district and school leaders

For 2015-16, in percent



SOURCE: Education Week Research Center

understanding of it, fueled by digital tools, is on the uptake.”

About a year ago, Dyer blogged about 55 digital tools and apps teachers use in the classroom and recently updated the

list to indicate that some of them are no longer around—but the list is growing.

One of the things that makes the tools and apps “so valuable and attractive is that they have visually vibrant displays,

and they’re giving instant feedback.” Besides that, she said, “a lot of them are fun,” and it’s not just teachers getting information about evidence of learning; the learners are as well. ■

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# What Happens When Students Are The Test Designers?

For a network of Virginia public schools, student projects offer proof of learning

By Madeline Will

ROANOKE, VA.

**W**ith classmates, parents, teachers, and even the Roanoke County schools superintendent standing before him, high school senior Bubba Smith took a deep breath and set the two-story Rube Goldberg machine into motion.

The contraption, which performed a series of complicated actions to lift a banner, was part of Bubba’s fourth-quarter grade for his AP Physics class. Students in physics and the AP Calculus class worked on the machine for nine weeks and then presented it during Hidden Valley High School’s end-of-year exhibition of students’ projects, most of which they designed themselves.

“We were doing stuff we don’t normally do in a classroom,” Bubba said of his project. “We don’t play with PVC pipes and ropes in the classroom.”

His classmate Ryan Crosser agreed. “A normal project is the same thing over and over again. It’s very structured—school is very structured,” he said.

Student-led assessments like this one are, in many ways, antithetical to the structure of the typical fill-in-the-bubble test. Students are asked to demonstrate their learning and knowledge in a meaningful way and to reflect on their own performance.

Nestled in the heart of Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains, the Roanoke County district has joined 10 other districts in the state that make up a Networked Improvement Community focused on implement-



—Stephanie Klein-Davis for Education Week

ing student-led assessment to bring about a deeper level of learning. The community is underwritten by the Assessment for Learning Project, a multiyear \$15 million grant-making and field-building initiative led by the Center for Innovation in Education at the University of Kentucky.

The project, supported through private philanthropy, is seeding 17 cutting-edge approaches across the country that vary in size and scope, to better understand how assessment can play into a more personalized, student-centered, competency-based learning process.

“The way we’ve been thinking of assessment that is driven by accountability—assessment with a capital A—isn’t

Students attending Hidden Valley High’s exhibition take in the Rube Goldberg machine. Teachers credit such end-of-year projects with helping to increase student engagement in learning.

delivering on the kind of learning and the kind of relationships that kids really need to succeed,” said Sarah Lench, the project’s director. “There’s a broader definition of student success than proficiency on English and math tests.”

## Getting Teachers on Board

In Virginia, the 11 districts involved in the network are all grappling with

different student-led assessment questions, including which grades to start with and what the assessment itself can look like. But the community has highlighted some key themes to guide its work: The assessment process must be meaningful to the student. The student receives feedback throughout the process, not just at the end. The student clearly demonstrates learning or growth. The student assesses his or her work. And, above all, students should be active participants in the assessment process.

One of the biggest challenges of this work is changing people's mindsets, said Shannon King, the manager of the Best Practices for Teaching & Learning program at the Fairfax County school system, which oversees the 11-district community.

"Teachers have to be willing to give up control and trust that students are going to do amazing things," she said.

To get there, most districts in the network have found that teachers need professional development, although a consensus hasn't emerged on what that should look like.

In the nearly 14,000-student Roanoke County district, for example, the professional development has been job-embedded.

While student-led assessment is not mandatory for teachers, they are encouraged to visit the classes where it is happening, said Rhonda Stegall, the director of secondary instruction for the Roanoke County district.

Hidden Valley High's work in the student-led assessment area is the most advanced in the district. Hidden Valley Middle School had its first exhibition of student-driven projects this year, and other schools in the district are interested in participating in the future.

Consultants have also worked with interested teachers to guide them through the process of letting students take more control of their learning, Stegall said. At Hidden Valley High, the transition has been slow but steady.

Four years ago, only eight teachers were interested in trying student-led assessments. Now, three-quarters of the 70 teachers in the school, from all subject areas, take part, said Stegall, who had previously been the principal of Hidden Valley High when they started the program.

"[Teachers have] spent the last 10 or 12 years learning how to teach to the test, so it's hard to break away from that mindset," she said. "Ultimately, this is



Before, the [tests] had control over [their profession]. Now, they're starting to take back some of that control. The morale has gone up; the enthusiasm, the passion for teaching is back."

**RHONDA STEGALL**

DIRECTOR, SECONDARY INSTRUCTION,  
ROANOKE COUNTY DISTRICT

really good instruction, and they see that this taps into students' enthusiasm and engagement."

Research shows that when students have a greater sense of agency, they perform better, said Eric Toshalis, the research director of Jobs for the Future, a nonprofit that runs the Student-Centered Learning Research Collaborative, an effort aimed at investigating and sharing knowledge about student-centered learning approaches.

"Learners' attention and engagement tends to be optimized whenever they are put in a position to own the information, to be driving the questions that are asked, and to have a role in deciding how they'll be assessed," he said.

"The locus of control in that particular learning activity moves from the instructor to the student. Like all of us, [when] the student has the experience of feeling like they are in control of ... and proficient at something; they understand in greater depth."

At Hidden Valley High, state test scores stayed the same after the school began implementing student-led assessments—they didn't increase, but they also didn't drop. Teachers had been concerned about the scores dropping, Stegall said, but once they saw the results and realized students were excited about learning, they were sold.

"The morale was really low when we were focusing on the test and the disaggregation of data—that's the only thing we were talking about," Stegall said. "Before, the [tests] had control over [their profession]. Now, they're starting to take back some of that control. The morale has gone up; the enthusiasm, the passion for teaching is back."

During the exhibition night, teachers in Roanoke remarked on how much more engaged students were with these projects, which made their job more fun, they said.

"I love the inquiry-based and project-based learning," said Beverly Newbern, a history and psychology teacher at Hidden Valley High. "You never see them light up otherwise. They're out of their chairs—the same chairs your great-great-grandparents have been sitting in since 1901."

### 'Assessment Is a Process'

Another challenge has been to differentiate student-led assessment from a science-fair-type project, Stegall said. Initially, she said, a lot of the projects were "fluff," while teachers learned how to incorporate meaty content and the state standards into students' projects.

Now, checks of understanding are built into the process, along with quiz-



zes, tests, or written components. At Hidden Valley High, students often go through protocols, where teachers and fellow students ask probing questions and discuss concerns about the project to make sure it is academically rigorous. And at the end, students have to evaluate their own work. The teacher determines the final grade, based on student self-assessment, peer assessment, and other benchmarks. Stegall said some teachers ask their students to explain the grade they deserve and why, providing information to back up their assertion.

As King, who oversees the Virginia network, put it: “A test is an event, and assessment is a process. It’s really embedded in that teaching and learning cycle.”

And that process can be challenging for students, Stegall said. “Some of our top-level kids, they really struggle with projects. They’re good at taking tests,” she said. “Their strength is direct recall of information, writing it on a piece of paper.”

During exhibition night, students pointed to real-world skills as their main takeaways from their projects.

The students who worked on the Rube Goldberg machine learned how to collaborate with different personalities, Bubba said, adding that he had to learn to delegate instead of handling everything himself.

“It wasn’t like a physics lab. ... It was something that failed, and we had to fix,” said senior Matthew Whitely, who also worked on that project. Groups of students built components of the machine separately, and when they put it all together, it didn’t run smoothly—the first time, the second time, and all the way up until the day of the exhibition, when it finally worked.

“We had to deal with failure,” Whitely said.

The Virginia network, which is more than halfway through its two-year, \$202,500 grant, hopes to collect quantitative and qualitative evidence in the fall that this type of assessment is improving student outcomes.

Meanwhile, the Assessment for Learning Project plans to introduce a new grant program soon for its existing grantees. The goal of the second grant will be to fully integrate these assessment reforms into education systems’ operations, said Lench, its director. ■

## COMMENTARY

Published April 4, 2017, in *Education Week’s Classroom Q&A With Larry Ferlazzo Blog*

# Author Interview: ‘The Perfect Assessment System’

By Larry Ferlazzo

**R**ick Stiggins, author of the new book *The Perfect Assessment System* (ASCD), agreed to answer a few questions.

Rick is the founder and retired president of the Assessment Training Institute (ATI), a professional-development company created and designed to provide teachers, school leaders, policymakers, and communities with the assessment literacy they need to face today’s assessment challenges. Stiggins’ other books include *Revolutionize Assessment* and *Defensible Teacher Evaluation*.

**LF:** You write that “our assessments must deliver far more than evidence for grading, sorting, and weeding out. They must also become teaching tools—tools that motivate all students and promote maximum success for all.” I, too, have always thought that assessments and grades only made sense if they were used in a positive way to move students forward. There seems to be a lot of lip service to supporting that view but, in the end, it can sometimes be less “efficient” for schools and teachers to proceed in that direction.

You provide a lot of suggestions in your book, but can you share two or three very practical suggestions for teachers who want to apply this kind of perspective to their classroom?

**Rick Stiggins:**

In “The Perfect Assessment System,” I point out that failure to understand of the basic principles of sound assessment practices on the part of federal, state and local educational policy makers and school leaders has caused them to cling to the blind faith belief that accountability testing improves school quality. This belief has played out over the last 70 years in local, state, national and international testing at a cumulative cost of billions of dollars even though it is a belief simply that

is not supported by rigorous scientific research. On the other hand, we have compelling evidence in hand gathered from around the world revealing that classroom assessment used as a teaching and learning tool can have a profoundly positive impact on student learning. My “perfect system” seeks to bring them to bear in our school improvement initiatives.

Teachers who use “assessment FOR learning” involve their students in ongoing self-assessment in ways that reveal to those learners (a) where they are headed in their learning, (b) where they are now in relation to those expectations, and (c) how each student can close the gap between the two. These teachers begin instruction with a student-friendly orientation to their learning destination and the pathway they will follow to learning success.

To help their students stay in touch with their current learning status and progress over time, these teachers provide students with continuous access to descriptive feedback revealing how they can do better the next time. Further, teachers help their students develop the self-assessment skills they need to begin to anticipate what comes next in their own learning so they can collaborate with their teacher to plan what come next for them. And finally, to help students attain continuous improvement, teachers focus instruction on keys to advancement and engage students in reflecting on and communicating with others about their progress over time.

What educational policy makers and school leaders must understand here is that few teachers have been given the opportunity to learn about these principles of assessment FOR learning. Our collective educational future hinges on providing them with the necessary professional development.

**LF:** This is basically a repeat of the last question except, now, I’m wondering if you could list some suggestions for how



administrators at both the school and district level can take some initial steps to support this kind of change?

**Rick Stiggins:**

Lest we believe that teachers can turn to their principals for the professional learning they need and want, we should be clear about the fact that relevant, helpful assessment training remains almost non-existent in most pre-service leadership preparation programs. This must change now. As programs open to inclusion of this dimension of leadership competence, it must be made clear to candidates their overarching responsibility is to put in place in their district, schools and classrooms the conditions necessary for teachers to be able to use assessment FOR learning.

First, leaders must build balanced local assessment systems that meet the information needs of classroom, interim benchmark and annual assessment users, each of which can serve formative and summative assessment purposes. Second, they make sure each teacher understands and is a confident master of the learning targets their student are expected to master.

Third, leaders ensure the quality of the assessments conducted throughout their system; that is, that both they and their teachers are sufficiently assessment literate to fulfill their responsibilities. Fourth, they build systems for communicating assessment results that fit the purpose for the communication, formative or summative. And finally, leaders ensure that the links between assessment and student motivation leave every student believing that learning success is within reach if they keep striving. All of these are active ingredients in my Perfect Assessment System.

**LF:** I was struck by what you had to say about assessment and student motivation, which I don't often hear discussed. Can you elaborate on that topic a bit?

**Rick Stiggins:**

That last entry in my response to question two, about assessment and student motivation, is critically important because of a recent change in the social mission assigned to our schools. In decades gone by, a primary mission was to begin the process of sorting citizens into the various segments of our social and economic system by ranking use according to achievement by the end of high school.

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- Rick Stiggins in *Education Week*  
Teacher

Schools were evaluated on the basis of the dependability of their judgments about who are the winners and losers. However, over the past two decades the accelerating rate of technological and social change in our society has let us to the inference that any student who leaves school without essential lifelong learner proficiencies will not be able to survive. So the mission of the institution has been expanded to include responsibility for ensuring universal competence in those essential proficiencies. In other words, schools are to leave no child behind in this sense. We can no longer afford to have major segments of our student population giving up in hopelessness.

The key to accomplishing this is to offer the promise of learning success to all students and build the motivation system on that hope. This can be accomplished by, once again, turning to the principles of assessment for learning. Teachers do this by helping students always remain aware of where they are headed, where they are now and how to close the gap between the two, teachers can get students on winning streaks and keep them there.

Each teacher's mission is to use the assessment process when students are learning to build each student's sense of academic self-efficacy or sense of control over their own academic well-being. Essentially, a perfect system replaces a

reward and punishment-driven behavior management system of motivation that yield winners and losers with a learning success-driving system that yields lifelong learners who learn more and faster (with evidence to prove it).

**LF:** You also talk about the role of assessment results in teacher evaluations. Can you share your thoughts?

**Rick Stiggins:**

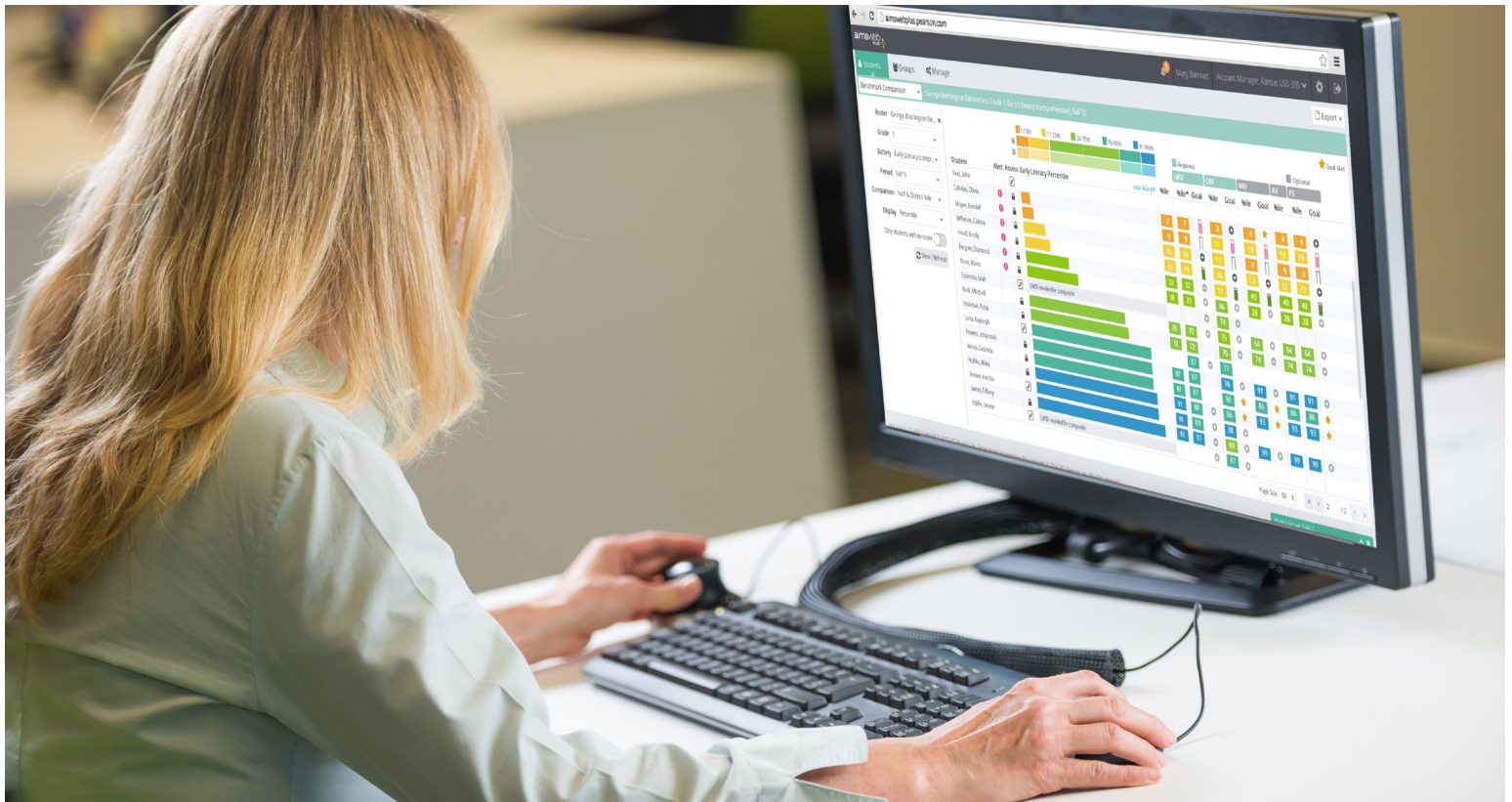
I just touch briefly on the role of student achievement in the evaluation of teacher performance in the *Perfect Assessment System* but delve deeply into it in another book, *Defensible Teacher Evaluation* (Corwin, 2014). The bottom line in this case is that it is patently and emphatically indefensible to evaluate teacher performance by relying on change in annual standardized test scores. For a variety of technical and practical reasons, these tests are incapable of detecting the impact of an individual teacher on the learning of their students. These tests simply lack (or clearly have not demonstrated) the instructional sensitivity to do so. Indeed, they were and are not designed with that purpose in mind and have not been validated for that purpose. Therefore, this use is indefensible.

However, I do believe there can be a role for student achievement in the evaluation of teacher performance that can arise from evidence gathered over time using classroom assessment. If a teacher and their supervisor identify high priority learning targets and gather pre/post instruction evidence of student achievement using high quality assessments, a teacher can build a strong case for the efficacy of her or his instruction using such evidence. Specific procedural details on how to accomplish this in a professional manner are presented in the Corwin book.

**LF:** Let's say you were stuck in an elevator with a public official who was crafting a statewide assessment policy. You only have a minute before he/she gets off. What do you say to him/her? What's your literal "elevator pitch"?

**Rick Stiggins:**

Elevator speech: Just as dramatic breakthroughs in technology have added exciting new dimensions to our lives and just as stunning breakthroughs in medicine have saved and extended lives so too can recent remarkable breakthroughs in our understanding of how to use assess-



## This January, how will you know if your students are on-track?

### Why benchmark assessments are critical for achieving year-end goals

Most of the discussion and debate about student assessments tends to focus on student screening at the start of the year, and the year-end achievement test. Yet, the time in-between those assessments is when teachers teach and students learn. And, as every teacher knows, looking at screening test scores from September won't do much to help you understand why a student is struggling in the third week of February.

Initial screenings provide a critical starting point for each student. But trying to reach year-end goals without any other information is like trying to find a destination without an address. When teachers have no route map or GPS, it's hard to avoid making wrong turns and easy to waste critical time and resources by focusing instruction on the wrong things.

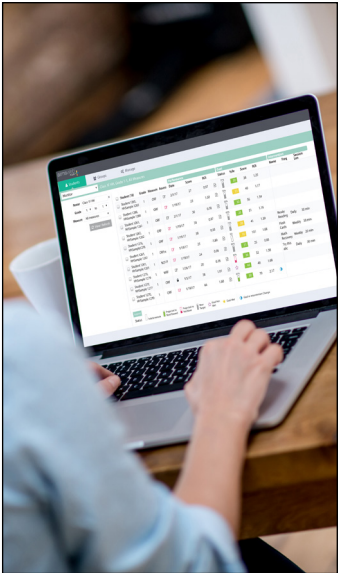
Benchmark assessments give teachers a "GPS" for each student by providing accurate, timely data they can use to:

- Support Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) instructional models
- Identify at-risk students early enough to make a real difference
- Close students' specific learning gaps quickly
- Predict students' achievement on end-of-year-targets more accurately
- Promote students' success in subsequent grade levels and beyond

Be aware that all assessments are not the same. You'll want to choose carefully to ensure that your screening and benchmarking assessments are from a reliable source, normed and standards-based, and thoroughly researched and tested.

## Three key ways benchmarking can help you

Benchmark assessments that report student performance during the year can help you in a number of important ways, such as:

**1**

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Because aimsweb™Plus assessments are both standards-based and curriculum-based, they provide accurate measurements of student progress — whether the instruction is delivered by an online program or directly from the teacher.

As a complete assessment solution, aimswebPlus provides reliable measures that you can use to:

- Objectively measure student progress and relate it directly to the curriculum
- Guide the overall instructional process
- Identify at-risk students early
- Monitor progress
- Differentiate and track targeted instruction
- Support the RTI and MTSS multi-tiered instructional models

[Read more](#) about how aimswebPlus supports blended learning.



**Dr. Mark Shinn**

**2**

### Align IEP Goals to grade-level standards

If the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) policy guidance has felt like a significant undertaking for you and your IEP teams, you're not alone. How can your IEP team move in the right direction with a solution that meets guidance compliance and also unites IEP goals and grade-level standards?

Dr. Mark Shinn, noted assessment and RTI expert, has stated his concerns about these legal requirements, and proposed that they show the clear need for frequent progress monitoring.

Using aimsweb™Plus, a scientifically sound progress monitoring assessment tool that encompasses CAP (Criteria for Acceptable Performance) and standards-aligned and curriculum-based measures, allows IEPs to remain procedurally and substantively compliant. Educators can get the progress monitoring help they need to achieve their dynamic grade-level-aligned IEP goals from aimswebPlus. It's an all-in-one solution that provides efficient formative assessment, reporting, and data management for Grades K-8.

[Hear Dr. Mark Shinn](#), Professor of School Psychology at National Louis University, talk about correlation and linkage between standards and IEP goals, and how to work with your standards and IEP goals to make them meet the most recent guidelines required by OSEP.





## 3

### Motivate students to care more, achieve more

Two recent articles co-authored by Ron Berger, Chief Academic Officer for EL Education, describe why [engaging students in assessment](#)<sup>1</sup> helps them become active agents in their own learning, and how [it can transform schools](#).<sup>2</sup> Four of the key positive effects that research shows can result from sharing students' data with them include:

#### Helping students care about their academic success

Sharing valid, reliable data gives students the opportunity to analyze their performance, track their progress, and see that hard work will pay off — and helps students who often feel “helpless” see that they have more power to control their performance than they may have thought.

#### Creating a more positive mindset in struggling students

When students see actual progress and begin to experience success, their mindsets shift from being disconnected and unmotivated to engaged and driven. Data helps students see the connection between practice, effort, dedication, attitude, and increased aptitude.

#### Sharing data encourages attentive reflection

Mindful reflection is built into data-driven learning efforts. Once students receive feedback, students can begin to analyze their errors for patterns, learn what the data is saying about their current level of performance, and start thinking actively about what they can do to improve.

#### Sharing data fosters a culture of collaboration and trust

Berger states that “making data transparent requires a safe classroom culture.” Sharing data with students one-to-one communicates that the teacher cares and helps establish a new level of understanding. Trust is created which helps students and teachers collaborate to make better progress.

Find out more about how sharing data can motivate your students, and how aimswebPlus can ensure that you [fully leverage your data-driven efforts](#).

<sup>1</sup> Berger, Ron, Rugen, Leah, Libby, Woodfin. MindsShift. “Leaders of Their Own Learning: Transforming Schools Through Student-Engaged Assessment.” [Excerpt from chapter: Using Data with Students]

<sup>2</sup> Berger, Ron, Rugen, Leah, Libby, Woodfin. EL Education. “Why Student-Engaged Assessment Matters.”

## The aimswebPlus Assessment Cycle

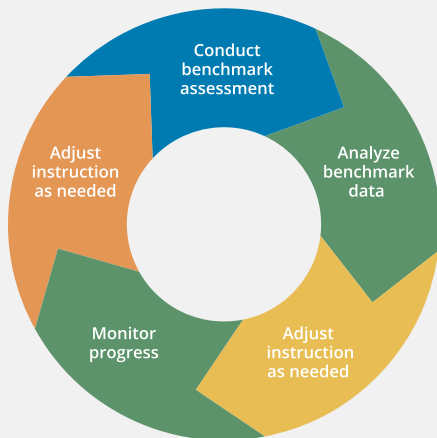
### What are the best assessment schedule and tools for your teachers' needs?

Given that no two students in your district are identical, how do you know what type of assessment will provide teachers with the most useful information, and when during the school year they should be given?

While every district's needs are different, our recommendation, based on information gathered over more than a decade working with educators across the country, is to supplement initial screening with three benchmarking assessments during the year.

Additional monitoring may be indicated for at-risk students, as it allows teachers to track progress and the impact of targeted instruction more closely.

Explore our [interactive assessment cycle](#) to learn more about how you and your students will benefit from aimswebPlus. It's the assessment solution that provides you with the full spectrum of universal screening, benchmarking, and progress monitoring needs throughout the school year for both reading and math.



To learn more about valid and normed formative assessments, data management, and reporting solutions for K-8, explore the basics of aimswebPlus at [aimswebPlus.com](https://www.aimswebplus.com).

ment as a teaching and learning tool dramatically accelerate and extend our students' learning lives. We have been stuck for decades in a 1950s vision of excellence in assessment that never was excellent. A new assessment world is there for the taking.

**LF:** Is there anything I haven't asked you about that you'd like to share?

**Rick Stiggins:**

We have been operating for decades on the belief that assessment is some-

thing adults do to students and if we just do it right, schools will work better. This is not incorrect in the sense that the adults in the system absolutely play a key role and must fulfill that role well. But what is missing from this vision is the student. As it turns out, students are constantly judging their own learning success and making key instructional decisions about themselves based on their interpretation of their academic record. Among those de-

cisions is whether to try, how hard to try, what risks to take or not. We know how to help them make smart decisions that do get them on winning streaks and keep them there. All teachers and school leaders need is the opportunity to learn about those things. But, alas, essential opportunities to learn are not forthcoming for them. But not to worry, we can spend billions to be sure we have the very best standardized tests money can buy... ■

## COMMENTARY

*Published January 17, 2017, in Education Week's Education Futures: Emerging Trends in K-12 Blog*

# The Newest Trend in Data-Driven Decisionmaking

By Woody Dillaha and Jeanette Haren

In recent years, there has been a shift from a focus on summative assessment data, such as state test scores, to formative assessment data, to help improve student learning outcomes across all subjects and grade levels. A key benefit of formative assessment is that it provides the information needed to adjust teaching and learning while they're happening. After all, the clearer the picture we have about what students know and don't know, the faster we can help them reach the next step in their learning.

The same is true for educators. The more information we have about their needs and their students' needs, the greater impact we can have on their professional learning and growth.

Yet, for too long, student growth data and educator growth data have been separate -- housed in separate data systems, under the supervision of separate departments. To truly make a difference in teaching and learning, it's time to break down these data silos and view this data in an integrated way.

Analytics can help. By changing the way we look at the relationship between professional learning and student learning, we can make connections and create insights that haven't existed before. Further, this new approach -- connecting stu-



dent and educator growth data with powerful analytics to inform decisions -- can have a tremendous impact from the district to the school to the individual level for both students and educators.

Here are 3 ways that districts and schools can use student and educator growth data to drive actions that create measurable improvements in teaching and learning.

### 1: Inform and differentiate instruction for students.

Assessments and the data from them are vital tools for understanding and improving student performance. In the classroom, teachers regularly use assessment data to check for student progress, identify areas of strength and weakness, and measure learning gains or gaps. This feedback loop allows teachers to adjust and differentiate their instruction, as needed, to help students move forward in their learning.

For example, at Eastside Elementary in Hernando County Schools (Fla.), the Unify assessment platform plays an integral role in their efforts to improve teaching and learning in every classroom and for every student. For example, the school leadership team -- which includes the principal, assistant principal, as-

assessment teacher, instructional practice coaches, and guidance counselors -- logs into the system daily to review, analyze and act on student performance data. The team also provides Unify reports to teachers, who use the data to guide their instructional decisions in the classroom and when they meet in professional learning communities. Thanks to their efforts, student performance has improved on state assessments in reading and math, and the Title I school raised its school grade from an "F" to a "B" in just two years.

## 2: Personalize professional learning for teachers.

While many districts firmly believe in taking a data-driven approach to improve students' learning, they may not be taking the same approach with teachers' professional learning. According to a nationwide survey of more than 500 principals and teachers, only 60 percent of teachers say that their district fosters a personalized professional learning environment. Further, almost 90 percent of teachers and leaders at least sometimes wish that teacher PD were more meaningful and relevant.

One district that's embracing a personalized approach to professional development is Long Beach Unified School District (Calif.). In addition to providing teachers with a personalized professional development system called myPD, the district is leveraging data as part of the cycle of personalized professional learning. Toward that end, its teacher training evaluates teachers' needs

based on their students' academic performance data, teachers' past training, self-evaluations and administrative feedback. Once these needs are assessed, the myPD system helps teachers create a personal learning plan. Teachers can then gauge their growth and set new goals by accessing integrated information from student academic performance data, coaching feedback, and observations. By offering teachers access to data in a way that's meaningful to them, the district is able to create more meaningful connections between teacher development and student learning.

## 3: Measure the effectiveness of district and school programs and initiatives.

With tools such as the Performance Matters Platform, which includes student growth, educator growth solutions, and actionable analytics, districts can more easily bring to light what they are doing effectively -- and what they can do better to ensure that all students are receiving the best educational opportunities. The platform includes tools for student assessment development and delivery, as well as educator professional learning management, performance evaluation and observer calibration. Together these solutions, leveraged with a real-time analytics engine, provide specific, actionable insights that boost student performance and build educator capacity.

Using this platform to capture the actions of students and teachers, districts can measure the impact of their PD and

educator effectiveness efforts, as well as their educational programs and tools -- and then see if they're actually impacting teaching and learning. For example, districts can examine:

- How did teachers do on their last evaluation?
- Which professional development courses are they taking as a result?
- How did their students perform on their last assessment? And how are they now performing with this new intervention or instructional method or technology?
- How can the latest formative assessment data be used to adjust each teacher's personalized professional learning plan, or school- or district-wide PD efforts?
- These connections create powerful feedback loops that drive and support ongoing improvement in student learning and instruction.

With real-time student growth data and educator growth data, districts can take strategic actions to support individual student and educator success, while providing a systematic, continuous process for district-wide improvement. It's taking "data-driven" to the next level, where (finally!) student and educator growth are truly connected for the benefit of all. ■

*Woody Dillaha is the president and co-founder of Performance Matters. Jeanette Haren is the chief product officer and co-founder of Performance Matters.*

## COMMENTARY

*Published August 4, 2016, in Education Week's Finding Common Ground Blog*

# Authentic Feedback: What It Is and Isn't

By Luke Mandouit

**T**he effectiveness of feedback in stimulating student growth is well established within educational literature. In John Hattie's seminal work: *'Visible Learning'*, feedback ranks 3rd on positive influence on student achievement; capable of stimulating 0.75 growth when delivered effectively. Despite this, it is also acknowledged that there is a significant variance

in the effectiveness of various forms of feedback; with praise, punishment and information delivered through symbols at the bottom of the scale, and the use of cues pertaining to process and learner self-regulation towards the top.

Adding further complexity to the feedback discussion is that much previous work in the area of feedback has been done from a teacher and researcher's perspective, and with a focus on measuring achievement. This may be

considered a contrast to schools, who have goals wider than just achievement, and have classrooms full of students who each bring a range of learning experiences, achievement levels, motivators, and emotions, all influencing the way they respond to feedback.

So how do teachers and school leaders integrate the incredibly insightful and ongoing research informing the use of feedback, and balance this with the reality of the classroom context?

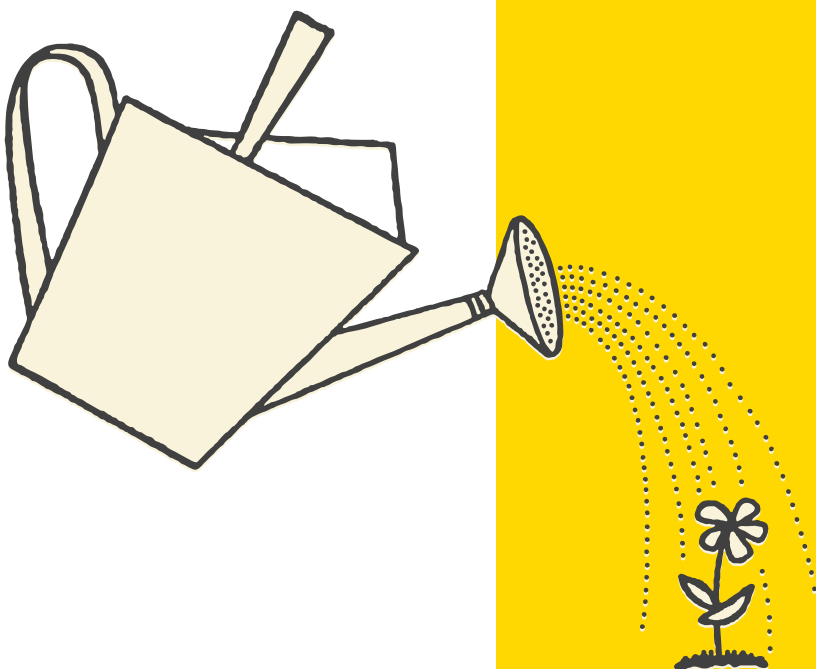


## It's Often Praise...Not Feedback

Praise within the feedback literature is a contentious issue; and, in terms of influencing achievement - is not overly effective. Non-specific praise directed to the student with comments such as: 'good job'; or, 'well done', gives no information in which to respond to in future task performance.

On the one hand praise is not necessarily bad; the issue is that when it is combined with constructive information about the task as then the students focus on the praise and often ignore the feedback about the task. The advantage of praise is that it can help cultivate positive relationships with students, and can stimulate positive reactions such as motivation and learning confidence. Students look up to teachers and seek approval, with a great deal of personal investment in the judgements and information delivered to them on task.

Given these reasons, praise still has some place in classrooms - so rather than throwing it out completely, we should simply use it more effectively and at the right time. The important message is to keep praise and meaningful feedback information on task separate; allowing for clear communication and reception of each message.



## Different feedback questions

Hattie and Timperley identify three major questions to which feedback can be addressed: Where am I going?; How am I going?; and, Where to next? Teachers often give feedback relative to the first two. However, when students are asked for the feedback they most prefer and can use, it is feedback about "Where to next?".

Yes, the feedback to this question can be enhanced by also providing feedback about the first two questions, but as much as possible try to include feedback that helps the student understand the next steps in learning. We all want to know how to move forward.

## Be specific

Corrective information delivered through crosses, underlines, circles and other symbols, or through vague comments, can be ambiguous to students and will often only flag correct or incorrect responses. Based on this flagging, especially in the case of incorrect answers, with no other information presented students will need to use their own judgement as to what has been done incorrectly and what they need to do differently next time around.

In some cases they may realize they rushed and made a spelling error, or that they got concepts mixed up, but essentially the response of the student is constructed based on their prior learning experiences, or with fellow peers. Delivery of this type of feedback is assuming that the students have the skills to decipher the flagged errors for themselves; and considering that the answer was incorrect, one could assume they don't.

Based on this, feedback should be specific and clearly articulated. In the information provided, students should have an understanding of how they have performed, and what they need to do next to improve. When grading a paper or piece of work, this can become arduous; but places even more importance on the use of formative evaluation strategies to deliver ongoing feedback, and in developing the capacity of the group to respond to feedback.

## Cultivate group capacity to respond to feedback

For every learner there are at least three voices in the classroom, these coming from: their peers, their teacher, and from within. But too often planned feedback is limited to coming from the teacher

to the student, and presented at the end of a unit. In addition to this, a key challenge to the teacher is finding the time to deliver effective feedback that tells the student how they are going and what they need to do to progress further.

Based on this, teachers should harness the voice of the students within the class, and plan for opportunities for students to provide feedback to peers. Developing the capacity of the group to deliver, and respond to feedback will not only enhance ongoing feedback to the learner from both peers and teacher; but will develop the reflective voice in the student leading to improved self-regulation processes that can be applied to future learning experiences.

This can be facilitated in a variety of ways with peer assessment of formative tasks a great starting point, or development of classroom protocols in which students seek assistance from each other when stuck on a problem. What is crucial however, that students understand what makes for a quality piece of work; this way they can apply this to peer assessment, which in turn they can apply to their own work going forward.

This can be facilitated through the setting of clear learning intentions and success criteria, the use of an exemplar alongside the assessment criteria with a discussion led by the teacher in why this work meets particular standards; or, through structured peer assessment activities in which students are guided through the grading and feedback process.

### **Giving good feedback now, will help the student beyond this specific learning experience**

As discussed earlier, students' learning experiences have a significant impact on how they respond to any future feedback, and the self-regulation strategies they develop. When students are faced with challenges, are reviewing their work, or are reading teacher's feedback, they are constantly drawing on their knowledge and prior learning experiences to make sense of the situation. Giving good feedback now, will enhance their capacity to deal with these challenges.

Quality feedback takes time, but often teachers are occupied with delivering the bulk of their feedback on the final assessment piece. Instead, teachers should focus on developing well-planned learning sequences that allow for ongoing assessment from teacher and peers alike, with structures in place for students to use

feedback to develop their ability to self-regulate. By coaching effective self talk and reflection, students will then be able to apply feedback to future learning experiences and perform at a higher level.

### **Change the class mindset**

Students acknowledge that process and self-regulation based feedback is the most useful to them. When they receive this type of feedback, they concur that they will use the information next time around. Despite this, when the focus of the task is an assessment, students simply want to know what they need to do to get a high mark.

Based on this, it is crucial that teachers develop a culture of growth in the classroom through use of language, and effective design of learning tasks. Rather than students receiving feedback on: 'Where to next?' at the conclusion of a unit of work along with their final mark, consideration should be given in planning to how this information will be delivered to the student during the formative and growth phases of the learning sequence. ■

*Luke Mandouit is a public school teacher and graduate student of John Hattie's at the University of Melbourne in Melbourne, Australia.*

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