



Innovative Assessment Practices

By Julie Petersen

Assessment for Learning (AFL)
Where we've been and where we're going

The seminal research on assessment for learning (AFL) has provided the stimulus and rationale for the contemporary classroom assessment.

In this sequence, teachers used diagnostic and formative assessment to improve and tailor their instruction, while summative assessment to publicly report on student achievement.

During the 1980s and 90s, diagnostic, formative, and summative assessment and assessment practices have been used interchangeably, despite some subtle differences in meaning.

Researcher, teachers, and policy makers have increasingly converged on the view that AFL has provided the stimulus and rationale for the contemporary classroom assessment.

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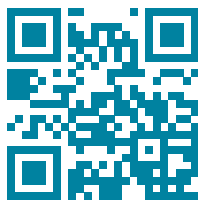
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“Assessment is the bridge between teaching and learning—it is only through assessment that we can find out whether what has happened in the classroom has produced the learning we intended.”

- DYLAN WILIAM



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Introduction

'Test' has become a sensitive word in public education. Although standards-based accountability has raised the bar for equitable education across the United States over the last several decades, this progress has come at a cost. Too often, tests fail to capture learning effectively, and many take more time and cause more stress than they are worth. Meanwhile, both teachers and parents feel that most testing is irrelevant, focused on a narrow set of subjects and measures, rarely affecting teaching – let alone learning.

At the same time, parents, teachers and students agree: information about student progress is vital. Surely, teachers cannot teach without this information. Parents wishing to engage and support their students' learning cannot do so without objective data about their progress. And students themselves need to know how they're doing in order to stay engaged and motivated.

So how can we create assessments that work as intended? Thanks to recent changes in policy, progress in technology, and cognitive science findings, we are on the verge of this transformation. New forms of assessment are better meeting the needs of teachers, parents, and students; these have the potential to improve teacher practice, enhance parent involvement – and most importantly, increase student learning.

In this paper, we will show why and how assessments are shifting, away from tests of learning toward assessments *for* learning. In the pages that follow, we will summarize the current state of assessment, explore trends that open the door for transforming assessment. We will also shine a light on the purpose of assessment, as well as several bright spots where assessment innovation is happening in schools across the United States. Bringing these ideas together, we conclude with a vision for how effective assessment could reinvigorate education, teaching, and learning in the 21st century.

Section 1: Reclaiming Assessment

As we enter the 21st century, we know public education and schools must change, particularly when it comes to assessment. The 2002 version of the federal education act, dubbed [No Child Left Behind](#), focused heavily on using high-stakes tests to highlight student achievement results in schools. In many cases, this led to punitive sanctions for schools and formed the basis of 'ineffective' ratings for teachers under new evaluation systems.

While this emphasis on accountability for schools and educators highlighted hidden achievement gaps and instructional issues within schools, the emphasis on stringent testing led to a backlash among parents, teachers, and the public. "Whether Presidents Bush and Obama intended for standardized tests to be the *de jure* purpose of public education, they certainly have become the *de facto* purpose, as most school systems are organized to promote success on these measures," wrote Phi Delta Kappa International in its 2016 report on the public's attitudes toward public schools. The poll also found that 37% of respondents oppose allowing students to opt out of standardized tests. [The National Center for Fair and Open Testing estimates](#) that 650,000 students opted-out in the 2014-2015 school year; [in New York State, where opt-out energy is highest](#), about 230,000 students opted out in spring 2016.

As a result, the recent 2016 reauthorization of the act, known as the [Every Child Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#), relaxes the role of such tests and gives districts and states more latitude in how they test. ESSA maintains annual standardized tests in reading and math for grades 3-8 and once in high school but reduces the stakes associated with such tests, eliminating the Adequate Yearly Progress measure that meted out school sanctions for insufficient progress. The act [also grants states flexibility](#) to try out alternative measures of student proficiency such as projects and portfolios. This is an important signal that will encourage states and schools to experiment with different approaches.

Still, most states continue to use summative standardized tests that emphasize multiple-choice formats that are easy and cheap to administer and score. What's more, these summative tests are often piled on top of regular formative tests, ranging from pop quizzes to unit tests, that provide teachers with timely information about whether or not students are learning. Both summative and formative tests tend to be optimized for assessing 'crystallized' or accumulated knowledge and skills, [notes journalist Anya Kamenetz](#). "What's largely missing from the traditional assessment palette of formative and summative

tests... is a way to get at the process of thought and at 'fluid' intelligence, the capacity to think logically and apply reasoning in novel situations."

Indeed, there is an increasing consensus that student learning must shift away from its emphasis on static content and knowledge, and toward these fluid practical skills, as well as non-cognitive habits. "Dependability, persistence, ambition, curiosity and getting along with others matter as much as (or very often much more than) cognitive ability for success," [notes a recent report on social and emotional learning from Getting Smart](#), citing agreement from all corners, including "researchers, social scientists and think tanks including Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman, New York Times journalist Paul Tough, MacArthur 'genius' prize winner Angela Duckworth, the Hewlett Foundation, the RAND Corporation, the National Research Council, the Brookings Institute, the Economic Policy Institute and the New America Foundation." While many agree on the importance of these traits, few understand how best to teach them – let alone how to measure them.

It's not just testing that is being called into question: letter grades are also losing their relevance. First introduced in the late 19th century as a way to help schools manage an influx of immigrants, letter grades are increasingly seen as an unhelpful way of measuring or communicating learning. The letter grade "pauses" learning, [says author and former classroom teacher Terry Heick of TeachThought](#), "essentially communicating subjectively something like '*at this point, if I had to average all of your understanding, progress, success, and performance into a single alphanumeric character, it'd be this.*'"

But despite frustration with testing and concerns about letter grades, schools know that measuring and communicating student progress remains as vital as ever – if not more. As the level and complexity of student learning have increased, technology is playing a critical role in improving assessment. Smart 'adaptive tests' adjust the difficulty of assessment items as students progress through them for more precise measurement. Other kinds of technology-enhanced questions such as drawing or arranging graphics or text "allow students to demonstrate more complex thinking and share their understanding of material in a way that was previously difficult to assess using traditional means," [notes the U.S. Department of Education](#).

Indeed, future testing may be 'stealth,' unnoticed by students as it is integrated into the regular learning process: "The record of a student's time-on-task, keystrokes and mouse-clicks collected by interactive ebooks, adaptive instructional software, and educational games provides a multitude of data for

educators to track a student's learning progress, and offers the potential to blend instruction with both formative and summative assessments into one continuous process that engages the student," [observes former district technologist Gee Kin Chou](#).

In this context, what will it take to fix assessments and grades? By focusing on the intended purposes of assessment, schools and educators can take concrete steps to reimagine assessment. Those steps could very well lead us not only to better testing but better teaching and better schooling.

Section 2: Purpose of Assessment

Assessment should not be designed primarily for policymakers and communities to hold their schools and teachers accountable for their use of public dollars — though of course, that is a useful byproduct. Nor should testing be simply a mechanism for rewarding course completion or rote memorization of facts.

Rather, assessment ought to be an indicator of, *and even a means for*, mastery of the content and skills that students need to be successful in college, career, and life. Good assessment serves three primary purposes:

1. **It improves instruction by giving feedback and direction to teachers and school leaders on what their students have learned and what they have not.** Strong assessments give teachers a sense of their students' progress and their needs so that they can pinpoint instructional needs for class and for individual students. It should also provide schools with a better understanding of what support and resources students and teachers need. With that information in hand, teachers and schools can target their resources and instruction. Ideally, schools would then waste fewer dollars and minutes on curriculum that is ineffective or that students are not ready to master.
2. **It enhances parental involvement by giving parents feedback and guidance on how much involvement is necessary and what kind.** Sharing assessment data gives parents a sense of how their students are progressing and can even point them toward ways they can

support student learning. [Research has found that parent engagement](#), informed by specific information about student goals and progress, enhances student achievement. “Parents benefit from having information about key indicators—such as student attendance, growth in learning, and achievement—on which they can have an impact,” [note the Harvard Family Research Project and the National Parent-Teacher Association](#). “These data open the door for meaningful conversations with teachers and students.”

3. Most importantly, it increases student engagement, motivation, and ultimately learning.

Assessments can and should inform not just adults but also students, whose ownership of their learning is critical to success in college and beyond. “Students who demonstrate ownership of learning can be successful in a wide range of learning environments,” [note researchers David Conley and Elizabeth French](#). In fact, cognitive science research shows that even the act of testing itself can improve absorption and retention of information. [Journalist Annie Murphy Paul calls this](#) “affirmative testing” or “testing for learning,” citing research that shows that every time students recall knowledge, that memory becomes “stronger, more stable and more accessible” – and even improves retention for related information that wasn’t directly tested.

A balanced approach to assessment would consider all these purposes, and ensure that any assessment meets at least one of these three goals and that systems of assessment would account for all three. For example, formative self-assessment is individualized and engaging for students and teachers but not useful to other audiences; summative large-scale assessments are useful for policymakers and perhaps principals, but cannot be individualized, [suggest the authors of Assessing Learning, a publication from the Students at the Center project](#). “Only a complete system of formative, interim, and summative assessments can be individualized, focused on learning and growth... and capable of generating useful information for a variety of audiences,” add the authors.

While the creation of an entirely new system of assessment is daunting, many schools are taking steps in this direction. Some of this energy has been bolstered by interest in and funding for more personalized learning – tailored to individual student needs – and competency-based learning – in which students only move forward when they have demonstrated mastery. In addition to more supportive federal and state policies, and technologies available for new testing approaches, there are also real resources available to schools that wish to improve assessment. Major foundations like the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative are supporting

innovations in assessment. For example, the Assessment for Learning project offers grants to schools designing or expanding new forms of testing or fundamentally new systems of assessment.

Whether on their own or in concert with others, with foundation dollars or with the creative redeployment of existing public funding, many schools are taking action to reimagine and reinvigorate assessment.

Section 3: Innovative Approaches To Assessment

With support from cognitive science, technology, and public policy, the time is right to refocus education on its most important purpose; advancing student learning.

These innovative approaches point a way toward new forms of assessment and grading — forms that could transform the way we organize teaching and schooling overall.

1. MASTERY-BASED ASSESSMENTS AND GRADING: Many schools are developing ways of assessing and grading students based on demonstrations and active applications of their knowledge.

- A variety of project-based high schools [such as High Tech High in San Diego](#) organize learning around the skills they want students to learn, then use rubrics to assess whether student projects have demonstrated their mastery of these skills. The Buck Institute for Education has developed sample rubrics (see <http://www.bie.org/objects/cat/rubrics> that other schools can use, and advises schools on how to develop and assess projects that push student learning forward.
- At [Summit Public Schools in California and Washington State](#), students use an online platform to see not only their progress on skills and projects, but also the content they need to learn to complete those projects successfully. In this example, student grades are composed of skills that have been demonstrated through projects (70%) and mini-assessments of relevant content (30%).
- In Ohio, [Metropolitan Cleveland Consortium for STEM \(MC2 STEM\) High School](#) is organized around [ten-week transdisciplinary capstone projects](#), which are assessed using rubrics and then

assigned a grade of 'M' or 'I' for each benchmark or task. Students only receive credit for the capstone when 100% of benchmarks have been mastered.

- At Young Women's Leadership Charter School in Chicago, student achievement is based on demonstrated proficiency in course outcomes, regardless of time, and student records always reflect the student's best work to date, rather than past failures. "We intentionally reframe inadequate performance as being 'Not Yet Proficient' on course outcomes, a predicament that implies the need for further work toward a learning goal, rather than a summary judgment of failure with its accompanying consequences," [say two of the school's founders, Camille Farrington and Margaret Small](#).

2. MEASURING SKILLS, NOT JUST CONTENT. With the increasing recognition that skills matter just as much – if not more – than content, schools are looking for ways to measure them.

- [Thomas R. Guskey, an education professor at the University of Kentucky who has studied grading and worked directly with several local schools](#), believes students should get two grades: one that reflects whether a student has mastered the content and a second that evaluates what he calls "process criteria," things such as whether a student collaborates well, participates in class discussions and turns in work on time. He has also developed standards-based report cards that communicate student learning against objective state standards.
- Making Community Connections Charter School in New Hampshire is [organized entirely around the 'habits of being and habits of mind'](#) that its students need to master, including [Self-Direction, Ownership, Character, Quality Work, Global Citizenship, Collaboration, Curiosity and Wonder, Critical Thinking, Creative Thinking, Decision-Making, Management, Organization, Leadership, Problem Solving and Communication](#).
- In the Farmington School District in Connecticut, [Spotlight Assessments](#) evaluate one of the specific skills the district expects its students to demonstrate by graduation in each grade level; these assessments take the form of performance tasks, essays, projects, or even computer-based assessments of critical thinking, problem solving, communication and collaboration, self-direction and resourcefulness. In 10th grade, Farmington also uses the [College & Work Readiness Assessment \(CWRA\)](#), a performance task-based test that measures critical thinking, analytic

reasoning, problem solving and written communication (for more, see <http://cae.org/products-and-services/k-12-assessment/critical-thinking-performance-assessment-cwra/>).

- [Public charter middle schools run by KIPP have piloted a Character Growth Card](#) to review each student's progress in demonstrating seven character strengths believed to be important for academic and lifelong success: zest, grit, self-control, optimism, curiosity, gratitude, and social intelligence. The Character Growth Card is not used to determine whether a student will be promoted to the next grade, but rather to discuss progress with students and parents and to provide students with feedback. (For more, see <http://www.kipp.org/our-approach/character>).

3. PROMOTING FEEDBACK AND REFLECTION. Educators experimenting with new approaches to assessment say that the most important thing is to provide students with feedback and opportunities to improve.

- [At Leadership Public Schools in Northern California](#), students grade their own writing and also have a peer grade it before submitting it to the teacher. Students first learn about how to use the writing rubric and review exemplars of student work.
- "The most important assessment that happens in any building is not the state assessment," [Expeditionary Learning chief academic officer Ron Berger told Education Week last year](#). "It's the assessment that's going on in a student's head every day, before she turns in work when she thinks: Is this good enough?" Expeditionary Learning is working with a network of more than 120 schools across the country to help them translate standards into kid-friendly targets so more can use student self-assessment.
- [Kentucky high school teacher Liz Prather goes a step further](#): she has her students build their own rubrics. She tells them the rubric should be 4x5 tables with different degrees of merit and categories by which the project will be assessed, and lets them develop the rest, including descriptions in each of the places where degrees and categories cross. "Letting students build their own rubrics is an excellent way to empower them, to differentiate their writing experience, and to put them in the driver's seat of their own education," Prather believes.

- At East Hall High School in Gainesville, GA, [educator John Hardison](#) uses grading codes, a baseball pitch counter, and voice comments to grade and give feedback on student essays. He started with a Google Sheets spreadsheet that logs brief codes for student feedback (such as “det” for “add more detail here” and “pe” for “punctuation error”), uses an \$8 baseball pitch counter to tally frequent errors, and records .mp4 audio files that deliver oral feedback that can be embedded right within a Google Doc.
- “I’ll never put a number, percentage or letter on any activity or project you complete,” [teacher Mark Barnes](#) decided to tell his 7th grade language arts class one day, in an attempt to turn his classroom from one full of just-enough effort to one in which conversation reigns. As a result, he says, “Students who had only experienced traditional grades throughout their school lives were asked to discuss learning, to reflect and, ultimately, to evaluate themselves. Many were shocked when we discussed an activity, and I asked them to return to prior learning, to rethink what they had done, and rework the activity for further discussion.” As for report card grades, students assign themselves a grade that reflects what they believe about their effort and mastery.

Section 4: Conclusion

Redesigning our systems of assessments and creating new, better tests can be daunting – but its effects could be inspiring. Imagine how public education might look and feel different if we approached assessment in this way:

- With assessments that relate to significant, specific learning goals — and with clearer, quicker communication of their results — **schools** would run on vivid student progress data, rather than on intuition. This would allow schools to make precise, well-informed decisions about staff, curriculum, and other resources.
- With regular, meaningful feedback about the impact of their instruction on student achievement, teachers’ days — and careers — would be more rewarding. They could tailor more of their work to students’ strengths, needs, and interests. Their work would be based on tests they not

only tolerate but trust. Knowing that their time and energy is contributing to student learning, teachers' lesson planning would be more energizing and fulfilling.

- During evenings and weekends, **parents** could focus their family conversations on learning, rather than pleading for information about what students did all day. Data about student progress would be paired with actionable ideas for how parents could advance that learning; these might range from extracurricular projects to local events to simply giving their students the time and space (and sleep) they need to learn.
- Best of all, **students** would have their own long-term goals and what they needed to get there. They would understand what concepts and skills they had already mastered and which they had not. They would receive regular directional feedback and the support and resources they need to correct course. Their days would feel more engaging, their work deeper and more relevant, and their stake in their own learning clearer than a distant diploma or hazy vision of 'college readiness.'

No matter your role in schooling, it is time to move toward a vision of assessments that enhance learning. While the responsibility for shifting policies and practices rests with administrators and school leaders, individual teachers can make a difference. They can craft authentic assessments whose data capture true learning, administering only assessments whose results inform specific actions. Above all, teachers and schools can dissolve the boundaries between assessment and learning, by putting more measurement tools and transparent data directly in the hands of students; in this way, with the informed support of teachers and parents, students can guide their own learning and begin to master their own destinies.

About FreshGrade

FreshGrade is one of the fastest growing education platforms that develops solutions aimed to enable educators, empower students and engage parents.

With FreshGrade, teachers and students can easily capture learning artifacts from the classroom and upload them to an online learning portfolio where parents, students and other teachers can access them, making learning visible in real time. FreshGrade portfolios move with the student from year-to-year, creating rich documentation of learning for teachers, students, and parents.

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